Le Guin

Annals of the Western Shore

Gifts
Voices
Powers

URSULA K. LE GUIN

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Gifts

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Powers

Brian Attebery, *editor*

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URSULA K. LE GUIN: ANNALS OF THE WESTERN SHORE
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GIFTS

Chapter 1

HE WAS lost when he came to us, and I fear the silver spoons he stole from us didn't save him when he ran away and went up into the high domains. Yet in the end the lost man, the runaway man was our guide.

Gry called him the runaway man. When he first came, she was sure he'd done some terrible thing, a murder or a betrayal, and was escaping vengeance. What else would bring a Lowlander here, among us?

"Ignorance," I said. "He knows nothing of us. He's not afraid of us."

"He said people down there warned him not to come up among the witches."

"But he knows nothing about the gifts," I said. "It's all just talk, to him. Legends, lies . . ."

We were both right, no doubt. Certainly Emmon was running away, if only from a well-earned reputation for thievery, or from boredom; he was as restless, as fearless and inquisitive and inconsequential as a hound puppy, trotting wherever his nose led him. Recalling the accent and turns of speech he had, I know now that he came from far in the south, farther than Algalanda, where tales of the Uplands were just that—tales: old rumors of the distant northland, where wicked witchfolk lived in icy mountains and did impossible things.

If he'd believed what they told him down in Danner, he'd never have come up to Caspromant. If he'd believed us, he never would have gone on higher in the mountains. He loved to hear stories, so he listened to ours, but he didn't believe them. He was a city man, he'd had some education, he'd travelled the length of the Lowlands. He knew the world. Who were we, me and Gry? What did we know, a blind boy and a grim girl, sixteen years old, stuck in the superstition and squalor of the desolate hill farms that we so grandly called our domains? He led us on, in his lazy kindness, to talk about the great powers we had, but while we talked he was seeing

the bare, hard way we lived, the cruel poverty, the cripples and backward people of the farms, seeing our ignorance of everything outside these dark hills, and saying to himself, Oh yes, what great powers they have, poor brats!

Gry and I feared that when he left us he went to Geremant. It is hard to think he may still be there, alive but a slave, with legs twisted like corkscrews, or his face made monstrous for Erroy's amusement, or his eyes truly blinded, as mine were not. For Erroy wouldn't have suffered his careless airs, his insolence, for an hour.

I took some pains to keep him away from my father when his tongue was flapping, but only because Canoc's patience was short and his mood dark, not because I feared he'd ever use his gift without good cause. In any case he paid little heed to Emmon or anyone else. Since my mother's death his mind was all given to grief and rage and rancor. He huddled over his pain, his longing for vengeance. Gry, who knew all the nests and eyries for miles around, once saw a carrion eagle brooding his pair of silvery, grotesque eaglets in a nest up on the Sheer, after a shepherd killed the mother bird who hunted for them both. So my father brooded and starved.

To Gry and me, Emmon was a treasure, a bright creature come into our gloom. He fed our hunger. For we were starving too.

He would never tell us enough about the Lowlands. He'd give an answer of some kind to every question I asked, but often a joking answer, evasive or merely vague. There was probably a good deal about his past life that he didn't want us to know, and anyhow he wasn't a keen observer and clear reporter, as Gry was when she was my eyes. She could describe exactly how the new bull calf looked, his bluish coat and knobby legs and little furry hornbuds, so that I could all but see him. But if I asked Emmon to tell about the city of Derris Water, all he said was that it wasn't much of a city and the market was dull. Yet I knew, because my mother had told me, that Derris Water had tall red houses and deep streets, that steps of slate led up from the docks and moorages where the river traffic came and went, that there was a market of birds, and a market of fish, and a market of spices and incense and honey, a market for old clothes and a market for new ones, and the great pottery fairs to which people came from all up and down the Trond River, even from the far shores of the ocean.

Maybe Emmon had had bad luck with his thieving in Derris Water.

Whatever the reason, he preferred to ask us the questions and sit back at ease to listen to us—to me, mostly. I was always a talker, if there was anybody to listen. Gry had a long habit of silence and watchfulness, but Emmon could draw her out.

I doubt he knew how lucky he'd been in finding us two, but he appreciated our making him welcome and keeping him comfortable through a bitter, rainy winter. He was sorry for us. He was bored, no doubt. He was inquisitive.

"So what is it this fellow up at Geremant does that's so fearsome?" he'd ask, his tone just skeptical enough that I'd try as hard as I could to convince him of the truth of what I said. But these were matters that were not much talked about, even among people with the gift. It seemed unnatural to speak of them aloud.

"The gift of that lineage is called the twisting," I said at last.

"Twisting? Like a sort of dancing?"

"No." The words were hard to find, and hard to say. "Twisting people."

"Making them turn around?"

"No. Their arms, legs. Necks. Bodies." I twisted my own body a bit with discomfort at the subject. Finally I said, "You saw old Gonnen, that woodsman, up over Knob Hill. We passed him yesterday on the cart road. Gry told you who he was."

"All bent over like a nutcracker."

"Brantor Erroy did that to him."

"Doubled him up like that? What for?"

"A punishment. The brantor said he came on him picking up wood in Gere Forest."

After a little, Emmon said, "Rheumatism will do that to a man."

"Gonnen was a young man then."

"So you don't yourself recall it happening."

"No," I said, vexed by his airy incredulity. "But he does. And my father does. Gonnen told him. Gonnen said he wasn't in Geremant at all, but only near the borderline, in our woods. Brantor Erroy saw him and shouted, and Gonnen was scared, and started to run away with the load of wood on his back. He fell. When he tried to stand, his back was bent over and hunched, the way it is now. If he tries to stand up, his wife said, he screams with the pain."

“And how did the brantor do this to him?”

Emmon had learned the word from us; he said he’d never heard it in the Lowlands. A brantor is the master or mistress of a domain, which is to say the chief and most gifted of a lineage. My father was Brantor of Caspromant. Gry’s mother was Brantor of the Barres of Roddmant and her father Brantor of the Rodds of that domain. We two were their heirs, their nestling eaglets.

I hesitated to answer Emmon’s question. His tone had not been mocking, but I didn’t know if I should say anything at all about the powers of the gift.

Gry answered him. “He’d have looked at the man,” she said in her quiet voice. In my blindness her voice always brought to me a sense of light air moving in the leaves of a tree. “And pointed his left hand or finger at him, and maybe said his name. And then he’d have said a word, or two, or more. And it was done.”

“What kind of words?”

Gry was silent; maybe she shrugged. “The Gere gift’s not mine,” she said at last. “We don’t know its ways.”

“Ways?”

“The way a gift acts.”

“Well, how does your gift act, what does it do, then?” Emmon asked her, not teasing, alive with curiosity. “It’s something to do with hunting?”

“The Barre gift is calling,” Gry said.

“Calling? What do you call?”

“Animals.”

“Deer?” After each question came a little silence, long enough for a nod. I imagined Gry’s face, intent yet closed, as she nodded. “Hares?— Wild swine?— Bear?— Well, if you called a bear and it came to you, what would you do then?”

“The huntsmen would kill it.” She paused, and said, “I don’t call to the hunt.”

Her voice was not wind in leaves as she said it, but wind on stone.

Our friend certainly didn’t understand what she meant, but her tone may have chilled him a little. He didn’t go on with her, but turned to me. “And you, Orrec, your gift is—?”

“The same as my father’s,” I said. “The Caspro gift is called the undoing. And I will not tell you anything about it, Emmon. Forgive me.”

“It’s you must forgive my clumsiness, Orrec,” Emmon said after a little silence of surprise, and his voice was so warm, with the courtesy and softness of the Lowlands in it, like my mother’s voice, that my eyes prickled with tears under the seal that shut them.

He or Gry built up our end of the fire. The warmth of it came round my legs again, very welcome. We were sitting in the big hearth of the Stone House of Caspromant, in the south corner, where seats are built deep into the stones of the chimneyside. It was a cold evening of late January. The wind up in the chimney hooted like great owls. The spinning women were gathered over at the other side of the hearth where the light was better. They talked a little or droned their long, soft, dull spinning songs, and we three in our corner went on talking.

“Well, what about the others, then?” Emmon asked, irrepressible. “You can tell about them, maybe? The other brantors, all over these mountains here, in their stone towers, eh, like this one? on their domains— What powers do they have? What are their gifts? What are they feared for?”

There was always that little challenge of half-disbelief, which I could not resist meeting. “The women of the lineage of Cordemant have the power of blinding,” I said, “or making deaf, or taking speech away.”

“Well, that’s ugly,” he said, sounding impressed, for the moment.

“Some of the Cordemant men have the same gift,” Gry said.

“Your father, Gry, the Brantor of Roddmant—has he a gift, or is it all your mother’s?”

“The Rodds have the gift of the knife,” she said.

“And that would be . . .”

“To send a spellknife into a man’s heart or cut his throat with it or kill him or maim him with it how they please, if he’s within sight.”

“By all the names of all the sons of Chorm, that’s a nice trick! A pretty gift! I’m glad you take after your mother.”

“So am I,” Gry said.

He kept coaxing and I couldn’t resist the sense of power it gave me to tell him of the powers of my people. So I told him of the Olm lineage, who can set a fire burning at any place they can see and point to; and the Callems, who can move heavy things by word and gesture, even buildings,

even hills; and the Morga lineage, who have the innersight, so that they see what you're thinking—though Gry said what they saw was any illness or weakness that might be in you. We agreed that in either case the Morgas could be uncomfortable neighbors, though not dangerous ones, which is why they keep out of the way, on poor domains far over in the northern glens, and no one knows much about them except that they breed good horses.

Then I told him what I had heard all my life about the lineages of the great domains, Helvarmant, Tibromant, Borremant, the warlords of the Carrantages, up on the mountain to the northeast. The gift of the Helvars was called cleansing, and it was akin to the gift of my lineage, so I said no more about it. The gifts of the Tibros and the Borres were called the rein and the broom. A man of Tibromant could take your will from you and make you do his will; that was the rein. Or a woman of Borremant could take your mind from you and leave you a blank idiot, brainless and speechless; that was the broom. And it was done, as with all such powers, with a glance, a gesture, a word.

But those powers were hearsay to us as much as to Emmon. There were none of those great lineages here in the Uplands, and brantors of the Carrantages did not mix with us people of the low domains, though they raided down the mountain now and then for serfs.

"And you fight back, with your knives and fires and all," Emmon said. "I can see why you live so scattered out! . . . And the folk on west of here that you've spoken of, the big domain, Drummant, is it? What's their brantor's way of making you unhappy? I like to know these things before I meet a fellow."

I did not speak. "The gift of Brantor Ogge is the slow wasting," Gry said.

Emmon laughed. He could not know not to laugh at that.

"Worst yet!" he said. "Well, I take it back about those people with the innersight, is it, who can tell you what ails you. After all, that could be a useful gift."

"Not against a raid," I said.

"Are you always fighting each other, then, your domains?"

"Of course."

"What for?"

“If you don’t fight, you’re taken over, your lineage is broken.” I treated his ignorance rather loftily. “That’s what the gifts are for, the powers—so you can protect your domain and keep your lineage pure. If we couldn’t protect ourselves we’d lose the gift. We’d be overrun by other lineages, and by common people, or even by *callucs*—” I stopped short. The word on my lips stopped me, the contemptuous word for Lowlanders, people of no gift, a word I had never said aloud in my life.

My mother had been a calluc. They had called her that at Drummant.

I could hear Emmon poking with a stick in the ashes, and after a while he said, “So these powers, these gifts, run in the family line, from father to son, like a snub nose might do?”

“And from mother to daughter,” said Gry, as I said nothing.

“So you’ve all got to marry in the family to keep the gift in the family. I can see that. Do the gifts die out if you can’t find a cousin to marry?”

“It’s not a problem in the Carrantages,” I said. “The land’s richer up there, the domains are bigger, with more people on them. A brantor there may have a dozen families of his lineage on his domain. Down here, the lineages are small. Gifts get weakened if there are too many marriages out of the lineage. But the strong gift runs true. Mother to daughter, father to son.”

“And so your trick with the animals came from your mother, the lady-brantor”—he gave the word a feminine form, which sounded ridiculous—“And Orrec’s gift is from Brantor Canoc, and I’ll ask no more about that. But you will tell me, now that you know I ask in friendship, were you born blind, Orrec? Or those witches you told of, from Cordemant, did they do this to you, in spite, or a feud, or a raid?”

I did not know how to put his question aside, and had no half-answer for it.

“No,” I said. “My father sealed my eyes.”

“Your father! Your father blinded you?”

I nodded.

Chapter 2

TO SEE that your life is a story while you're in the middle of living it may be a help to living it well. It's unwise, though, to think you know how it's going to go, or how it's going to end. That's to be known only when it's over.

And even when it's over, even when it's somebody else's life, somebody who lived a hundred years ago, whose story I've heard told time and again, while I'm hearing it I hope and fear as if I didn't know how it would end; and so I live the story and it lives in me. That's as good a way as I know to outwit death. Stories are what death thinks he puts an end to. He can't understand that they end in him, but they don't end with him.

Other people's stories may become part of your own, the foundation of it, the ground it goes on. So it was with my father's story of the Blind Brantor; and his story of the raid on Dunet; and my mother's stories of the Lowlands and of the time when Cumbelo was King.

When I think of my childhood, I enter into the hall of the Stone House, I am in the hearth seat, in the muddy courtyard or the clean stables of Caspromant; I am in the kitchen garden with my mother picking beans, or with her by the hearth in the round tower room; I am out on the open hills with Gry; I am in the world of the never-ending stories.

A great, thick staff of yew wood, crudely cut but polished black at the grip by long use, hung beside the door of the Stone House, in the dark entryway: Blind Caddard's staff. It was not to be touched. It was much taller than I was when I first knew that. I used to go and touch it secretly for the thrill of it, because it was forbidden, because it was a mystery.

I thought Brantor Caddard had been my father's father, for that was as far back in history as my understanding went. I knew my grandfather's name had been Orrec. I was named for him. So, in my mind, my father had two fathers. I had no difficulty with that, but found it interesting.

I was in the stables with my father, looking after the horses. He did not fully trust any of his people with his horses, and had begun training me to help him with them when I was three. I was up on a step stool currying the winter hair out of the roan mare's coat. I asked my father, who was working on the big grey stallion in the next stall, "Why did you only name me for one of your fathers?"

"I had only one to name you for," my father said. "Like most respectable folk." He did not often laugh, but I could see his dry smile.

"Then who was Brantor Caddard?"—but then I had figured it out before he could answer—"He was your father's father!"

"My father's father's father's father," Canoc said, through the cloud of winter fur and dust and dried mud he was bringing up out of Greylag's coat. I kept tugging and whacking and combing away at the mare's flank, and was rewarded with rubbish in my eyes and nose and mouth, and a patch of bright white-and-red spring coat the size of my hand on Roanie's flank, and a rumble of contentment from her. She was like a cat; if you petted her she leaned on you. I pushed her off as hard as I could and worked on, trying to enlarge the bright patch. There were too many fathers for me to keep straight.

The one I had came around to the front of the mare's stall, wiping his face, and stood there watching me. I worked away, showing off, pushing the currycomb now in strokes too long to do much good. But my father didn't say anything about it. He said, "Caddard had the greatest gift of our lineage, or any other of the western hills. The greatest that was ever given us. What is the gift of our lineage, Orrec?"

I stopped work, stepped down from the stool, carefully, because it was a long step down for me, and stood facing my father. When he said my name, I stood up, stood still, and faced him: so I had done as far back as I could remember.

"Our gift is the undoing," I said.

He nodded. He was always gentle with me. I had no fear of harm from him. Obeying him was a difficult, intense pleasure. His satisfaction was my reward.

"What does that mean?"

I said as he had taught me to say: "It means the power to undo, unmake, destroy."

“Have you seen me use that power?”

“I saw you make a bowl go all to pieces.”

“Have you seen me use that power on a living thing?”

“I saw you make a willow wand go all soft and black.”

I hoped he would stop, but that was no longer where these questions stopped.

“Have you seen me use that power on a living animal?”

“I saw you make . . . a . . . make a rat die.”

“How did it die?” His voice was quiet and relentless.

It was in the winter. In the courtyard. A trapped rat. A young rat. It had got into a rain barrel and been unable to clamber out. Darre the sweeper saw it first. My father said, “Come here, Orrec,” and I came, and he said, “Be still and see this,” and I stood still and watched. I craned my neck so that I could see the rat swimming in the water that half-filled the barrel. My father stood above the barrel, gazing down steadily into it. He moved his hand, his left hand, and said something or breathed sharply out. The rat squirmed once, shuddered, and floated on the water. My father reached his right hand in and brought it out. It lay utterly limp in his hand, shapeless, like a wet rag, not like a rat. But I saw the tail and toes with their tiny claws. “Touch it, Orrec,” he said. I touched it. It was soft, without bones, like a little half-filled sack of meal inside its thin wet skin. “It is unmade,” my father said, his eyes on mine, and I was afraid of his eyes then.

“You unmade it,” I said now, in the stable, with a dry mouth, afraid of my father’s eyes.

He nodded.

“I have that power,” he said, “as you will. And as it grows in you, I’ll teach you the way to use it. What is the way to use your gift?”

“With eye and hand and breath and will,” I said, as he had taught me.

He nodded, satisfied. I relaxed a little; but he did not. The test was not over.

“Look at that knot of hair, Orrec,” he said. A little clotted tangle of muddy horsehair lay on the stable floor near my feet, among the slight littering of straw. It had been caught in the roan mare’s mane, and I had worked it free and let it drop. At first I thought my father was going to scold me for dirtying the stable floor.

“Look at it. At it only. Don’t look away from it. Keep your eyes on it.”

I obeyed.

“Move your hand—so.” Coming behind me, my father moved my left arm and hand gently, carefully, till the joined fingers pointed at the clot of mud and hair. “Hold it so. Now, say what I say after me. With your breath but not your voice. Say this.” He whispered something that had no meaning to me, and I whispered it after him, holding my hand pointing as he had placed it, staring and staring at the clot of hair.

For a moment nothing moved, everything held still. Then Roanie sighed and shifted her feet, and I heard the wind gusting outside the stable door, and the tangle of muddy hair on the floor moved a little.

“It moved!” I cried.

“The wind moved it,” my father said. His voice was mild, with a smile in it. He stood differently, stretched his shoulders. “Wait a while. You’re not six yet.”

“You do it, Father,” I said, staring at the clot of horsehair, excited and angry, vindictive. “You unmake it!”

I scarcely saw him move or heard his breath. The tangled thing on the floor uncurled in a puff of dust, and nothing lay there but a few long, reddish-cream hairs.

“The power will come to you,” Canoc said. “The gift is strong in our lineage. But in Caddard it was strongest. Sit down here. You’re old enough to know his story.”

I sat perched on the step stool. My father stood in the doorway of the stall, a thin, straight, dark man, bare-legged in his heavy black Uplander kilt and coat, his eyes dark and bright through the mask of stable dirt on his face. His hands were filthy too, but they were strong, fine hands, steady, without restlessness. His voice was quiet. His will was strong.

He told me the story of Blind Caddard.

“Caddard showed his gift earlier than any son of our lineage, or any but the greatest families of the Carrantages. At three, he’d gaze at his toys and they’d fall to pieces, and he could untie a knot with a look. At four, he used his power against a dog that leapt on him and frightened him, and destroyed it. As I destroyed that rat.”

He paused for my nod of acknowledgment.

“The servants were afraid of him, and his mother said, ‘While his will is a child’s will, he is a danger to us all, even to me.’ She was a woman of

our lineage; she and her husband Orrec were cousins. He heeded her warning. They tied a bandage around the child's eyes for three years, so that he couldn't use the power of the eye. All that time they taught and trained him. As I teach you and train you. He learned well. His reward for perfect obedience was to see again. And he was careful, using his great gift only in practice, on things of no use or value.

"Only twice in his youth did he show his power. Once, when the Brantor of Drummant had been raiding cattle from one domain and another, they invited him to Caspromant and let him see Caddard, who was a boy of twelve then, unmake a flight of wild geese. With one glance and gesture he dropped them from the sky. He did this smilingly, as if to entertain their visitor. 'A keen eye,' Drum said. And he stole none of our cattle.

"Then when Caddard was seventeen a war party came down from the Carrantages led by the Brantor of Tibromant. They were after men and women to work new fields they'd cleared. Our people came running here to the Stone House for protection, fearing to be taken under the rein, made to follow that brantor and die toiling for him with no will but his left to them. Caddard's father Orrec hoped to withstand the raid here in the Stone House, but Caddard, not telling him what he planned, went out alone. Keeping to the edge of the forest, he spied out one highlander and then another, and as he saw them he unmade them."

I saw the rat. The soft sack of skin.

"He let the other highlanders find those bodies. Then carrying the parley flag he came out on the hillside, facing the Long Cairn, alone. He called to the raiders, 'I have done this across a mile of distance, and farther.' He called to them over the valley, as they stood up there behind the great rocks of the Cairn, 'The rocks do not hide you from me.' And he destroyed a standing stone of the Cairn. The Brantor of Tibromant had taken shelter behind it. It shattered and fell into chips and dust. 'My eye is strong,' Caddard said.

"He waited for them to answer. Tibro said, 'Your eye is strong, Caspro.' Caddard said, 'Do you come here seeking servants?' The other said, 'We need men, yes.' Caddard said, 'I will give you two of our people to work for you, but as servants, not under the rein.' The brantor said, 'You are generous. We will take your gift and keep your terms.' Caddard came back here to the house and called out two young serfs from different farms of

our domain. He took them to the highlanders and gave them over to them. Then he said to Tibro, ‘Go back to your highlands now, and I will not follow.’

“They went, and since that day they have never come raiding from the Carrantages as far west as our domain.

“So Caddard Strong-Eye was the talk of all the Uplands.”

He stopped to let me think about what I’d heard. After a while I looked up at him to see if I could ask a question. It seemed to be all right, so I asked what I wanted to know—“Did the young men from our domain want to go to Tibromant?”

“No,” my father said. “And Caddard didn’t want to send them to serve another master, or lose their labor here. But if power is shown, a gift must be offered. That is important. Remember it. Tell me what I said.”

“It’s important, if you show your power, to offer a gift too.”

My father nodded approval. “The gift’s gift,” he said, low and dry. “So, then, a while after that, old Orrec went with his wife and some of his people to our high farms, leaving the Stone House to his son Caddard, who was the brantor now. And the domain prospered. We ran a thousand sheep in those days, they say, on the Stony Hills. And our white oxen were famous. Men came up from Dunet and Danner, back then, to bargain for our cattle. Caddard married a woman of the Barres of Drummant, Semedan, in a great wedding. Drum had wanted her for his own son, but Semedan refused him, for all his wealth, and married Caddard. People came to that wedding from all the domains of the west.”

Canoc paused. He slapped the roan mare’s rump as she switched her snarled tail at him. She shuffled, nudging against me, wanting me to get back to combing the tangles out of her.

“Semedan had the gift of her lineage. She went on the hunt with Caddard and called the deer and elk and wild swine to him. They had a daughter, Assal, and a son, Canoc. And all went well. But after some years there came a bad winter and a cold dry summer, with little grass for the flocks. Crops failed. A plague came among our white cattle. All the finest stock died in a single season. There was sickness among the people of the domain too. Semedan bore a dead child and was ill for a long time after. The drought went on a year, another year. Everything went badly. But Cad-

dard could do nothing. These were not matters in his power. So he lived in rage."

I watched my father's face. Grief, dismay, anger swept over it as he told of them. His bright eyes saw only what he told.

"Our misfortune made the people of Drummant grow insolent, and they came raiding and thieving here. They stole a good horse from our west pastures. Caddard went after the horse thieves and found them halfway home to Drummant. In his heat and fury he did not control his power, but destroyed them all, six men. One of them was a nephew of the Brantor of Drummant. Drum could not ask bloodright, for the men had been thieving, they had the stolen horse with them. But it left a greater hatred between our domains.

"After that, people went in fear of Caddard's temper. When a dog disobeyed him, he unmade it. If he missed his shot hunting, he'd destroy all the thickets that hid the game, leaving them black and ruined. A shepherd spoke some insolence to him, up on the high pastures, and in his anger Caddard withered the man's arm and hand. Children ran from his shadow, now.

"Bad times breed quarrels. Caddard bade his wife come call to the hunt for him. She refused, saying she was not well. He ordered her, 'Come. I must hunt, there is no meat in the house.' She said, 'Go hunt, then. I will not come.' And she turned away, with a serving maid she was fond of, a girl of twelve who helped her with her children. Then in a rage of anger Caddard came in front of them, saying, 'Do what I say!'—and with eye, hand, breath, and will, he struck the girl. She sank down there, destroyed, unmade.

"Semedan cried out and knelt over her and saw she was dead. Then she stood up from the body and faced Caddard. 'Did you not dare strike me?' she said, scorning him. And in his fury, he struck her down.

"The people of the house stood and saw all this. The children cried out and tried to come to their mother, weeping, and the women held them back.

"Then Caddard went out of the hall, to his wife's room, and no one dared follow him.

"When he knew what he had done, he knew what he must do. He could not trust his strength to control his gift. Therefore he blinded his eyes."

The first time Canoc told me that story, he did not say how Caddard blinded himself. I was too young, too scared and bewildered already by this terrible history, to ask or wonder. Later on, when I was older, I asked if Caddard used his dagger. No, Canoc said. He used his gift to undo his gift.

Among Semedan's things was a glass mirror in a silver frame shaped like a leaping salmon. The merchants that used to venture up from Dunet and Danner to bargain for cattle and woollen goods sometimes brought such rare toys and fancies. In the first year of the marriage, Caddard had traded a white bull for the mirror to give to his young wife. He took it in his hand now and looked into it. He saw his own eyes. With hand and breath and will he struck them with the power in them. The glass shattered, and he was blind.

No one sought bloodright against him for the murder of his wife and the girl. Blind as he was, he served as Brantor of Caspromant till he had trained his son Canoc in the use of his power. Then Canoc became brantor and Blind Caddard went up to the high farms, where he lived among the cattle herders till he died.

I did not like all this sad and fearful ending of the story. The first time I heard it, I soon put most of it out of my mind. What I liked was the first part, about the boy with the mighty gift, who could frighten his own mother, and the brave youth defying the enemy and saving his domain. When I went out alone on the open hills, I was Caddard Strong-Eye. A hundred times I summoned the terrified highlanders and called, "I have done this across a mile of distance!"—and shattered the boulder they hid behind, and sent them crawling home. I remembered how my father had held and positioned my left hand, and time and again I stood staring with all my eyes at a rock, and held my hand so, in just that way—but I could not recall the word he had whispered to me, if it had been a word. *With the breath, not the voice*, he had said. I could almost remember it, yet I could not hear the sound of it or feel how my lips and tongue had formed it, if they had formed it. Time and again I almost said it, but said nothing. Then, impatient, I hissed some meaningless sound and pretended that the rock moved, shattered, dropped into dust and fragments, and the highlanders cowered before me as I said, "My eye is strong!"

I would go look at the boulder then, and once or twice I was sure there was a chip or crack in it that had not been there before.

Sometimes when I had been Caddard Strong-Eye long enough, I became one of the farm boys he gave to the highlanders. I escaped from them by clever ruses and woodcraft, and eluded pursuit, and led my pursuers into the bogs I knew and they didn't know, and so came back to Caspromant. Why a serf would want to return to servitude at Caspromant having escaped it at Tibromant I didn't know. I never thought to ask. In all likelihood that is what such a boy would do: he would come home. Our farm people and herders were about as well off as we in the Stone House were. Our fortunes were one. It wasn't fear of our powers that kept them with us, generation after generation. Our powers protected them. What they feared was what they didn't know, what they clung to was what they knew. I knew where I'd go if I were carried off by enemies and escaped. I knew there was nowhere in all the Uplands, or in the broad, bright, lower world my mother told me of, that I would ever love as I loved the bare hills and thin woods, the rocks and bogs of Caspromant. I know it still.

Chapter 3

THE OTHER great tale my father told me was of the raid on Dunet, and I liked all of that one, for it had the happiest of endings. It ended, as far as I was concerned, in me.

My father had been a young man in need of a wife. There were people of our lineage at the domains of Corde and Drum. My grandfather had taken pains to keep on good terms with the Cordes and tried to patch over the old ill feeling between Caspros and Drums, not joining forays against them or letting his people do any cattle raiding or sheep stealing from them; this was out of fellowship with his relations at those domains, and because he hoped his son might find a wife among them. Our gift went from father to son, but no one doubted that a mother of the true line strengthened the gift. So, there being no girl of the true line at the home domain, we looked to Cordemant, where there were a number of young men of our family, though only one marriageable woman. She was twenty years older than Canoc. Such a marriage has been made often enough—anything to "keep the gift." But Canoc hesitated, and before Orrec could force the issue, Brantor Ogge of Drummant demanded the woman for his own youngest son. The Cordes were under Ogge's thumb, and gave her to him.

That left only the Caspros of Drummant to furnish a bride within the lineage. There were two girls there who would have done well enough, given a few years more to grow up. They would have been glad to marry back into the domain of their kinfolk. But the old hatred between the Drums and the Caspros was strong in Brantor Ogge. He turned away Orrec's advances, scorned his offers, and married the girls off at fourteen and fifteen, one to a farmer and one to a serf.

This was a deliberate insult to the girls, and to the lineage they came from, and worse yet, a deliberate weakening of our gift. Few people of the domains approved of Ogge's arrogance. A fair contest between powers is

one thing, an unfair attack on power itself is another. But Drummant was a very strong domain, and Brantor Ogge did as he pleased there.

So there was no woman of the Caspro blood for Canoc to marry. As he said to me, “Ogge saved me from the old lady at Cordemant and the poor chicken-faced girls at Drummant. So I said to my father, ‘I’ll go raiding.’ ”

Orrec thought he meant raiding the small domains in the Glens, or maybe north into Morgamant, which had a reputation for fine horses and beautiful women. But Canoc had a bolder venture in mind. He gathered a troop, stout young farmers of Caspromant, a couple of the Caspros of Cordemant, and Ternoc Rodd, and other young men from one domain or another who thought a little serf snatching or booty taking was a fine idea; and they all met one May morning down at the Crossways under the Sheer and rode down the narrow track to the south.

There had been no raid into the Lowlands for seventy years.

The farmers wore stiff, thick leather jackets and bronze caps and carried lance and cudgel and long dagger, in case it came to blood-fighting. The men of the lineages wore the black felt kilt and coat and went bare-legged and bare-headed, their long black hair braided and clubbed. They carried no weapon but a hunting knife and their eyes.

“When I saw the lot of us, I wished I’d gone first and stolen some of the Morga horses,” Canoc said. “We’d have been a fine sight but for the creatures most of us had to ride. I had King”—Roanie’s sire, a tall red horse that I could just remember—“but Ternoc was on a droop-lipped plowmare, and all Barto had to ride was a piebald pony with a blind eye. The mules were handsome, though, three of the fine ones Father bred. We led them. They were to carry home our loot.”

He laughed. He was always light-hearted, telling this story. I imagine the little procession, the grim, bright-eyed young men on plodding horses, jingling in file down the narrow, grassy, rock-strewn track, out of the Uplands into the world below. Mount Airn would have risen up behind them when they looked back, and Barric with its grey crags, and then at last, looming higher than all, the Carrantages, white-crowned and huge.

Before them as far as the eye could see lay grassy hills—“green as beryl,” my father said, his eyes looking back into the memory of that rich, empty land.

On the first day of riding they met no one, saw no sign of man, no cattle or sheep, only the quail and the circling hawk. The Lowlanders left a wide margin between themselves and the mountain folk. The raiders rode all day at the slow pace of Barto's purblind pony and camped on a hillside. Only late in the morning of the next day did they begin to see sheep and goats on stone-fenced hills; then a farmhouse far off, and a mill down in a stream valley. The track grew to a cart road, and to a highroad that ran between plowlands, and then before them, smoke-wreathed and red-roofed on its sunny hillside, stood the town of Dunet.

I do not know what my father intended his raid to be—a sudden, fierce onslaught of warriors falling on terrified townsfolk, or an impressive entry and demands enforced by the threat of dreaded and uncanny powers. Whatever he had imagined doing, when he came there he led his troop to the city and into the streets not at a gallop, shouting and brandishing weapons, but sedately, in order. So they went all but unnoticed among the crowds and flocks and wagons and horse herds of a market day, until they were right in the central square and marketplace, where suddenly people saw them and began to scream, "Uplanders! Witchfolk!" Then some ran to escape or to bar their doors, and others scurried to save their market goods, and those fleeing were trapped in the square by those coming to see what was going on, and there was panic and havoc, stalls overturned, canopies dragging, frightened horses plunging and trampling, cattle bawling, the farmers of Caspromant brandishing their lances and cudgels at fishwives and tinsmiths. Canoc called them out of this panic, threatening not the townspeople but his own men with his power, till he got them gathered around him, some of them doggedly hanging on to goods they had grabbed from the market stalls—a pink shawl, a copper stew pot.

He told me, "I saw that in a blood-fight, we were lost. There were hundreds of those folk—hundreds!"

How could he have known what a town was? He had never seen one.

"If we went into the houses to loot, we'd be separated and they'd pick us off one by one. Only Ternoc and I had a gift strong enough to attack or defend with. And what were we to take? There was all this stuff, things, everywhere—food, goods, clothes, no end to it! How could we take all that? What were we after? I wanted me a wife, but I didn't see how that

was to be, the way things were there. And the one thing we really need in the Uplands is hands to work. I knew if I didn't put a scare into them, and soon, they'd be all over us. So I raised up the parley flag, hoping they knew what it was. They did. Some men showed themselves at the windows of the big house over the marketplace and waved a cloth out the window.

"Then I called out, 'I am Canoc Caspro of the True Lineage of Caspromant, and I have the gift and power to undo, which you shall see me use.' And first I struck one of the market stalls, so it fell all to pieces. Then I turned half round, to be sure they saw what I did and how I did it, and I struck the corner of a big stone building across from the house they were in. I held my arm out steady, so they could see. They saw the wall of the building move and bulge, and stones slip down out of it, making a hole in the wall. That grew bigger, and the sacks of grain inside burst open, and the noise of the stones falling was terrible. 'Enough, enough!' they shouted out. So I ceased to unmake the granary and turned to them again. They wanted to talk and parley. They asked me what I wanted of them. I said, 'Women and boys.'

"There went up an awful howl at that. People in all the streets and houses around shouted, 'No! No! Kill the witches!' There were so many of them, their voices were like a storm of wind. My horse jumped and screamed. An arrow had just nicked his rump. I looked up into the window above the one where the men were parleying and saw an archer leaning far out the window to draw his bow again. I struck him. His body fell like a sack from the window to the stones below, and burst. Then I saw a man at the edge of the crowd of people caught in the marketplace stoop and come up with a stone in his hand, and I struck him. I unmade his arm only. It fell to his side limp as a string. He began to scream, and there was wailing and panic where the archer had fallen. 'I will unmake the next man who moves,' I called aloud. And nobody moved."

Canoc kept his men close around while he parleyed. Ternoc guarded his back. The men speaking for the town consented, under his threats, to give him five serf women and five boys. They began to argue for time to collect the tribute, as they called it, but that he forbade: "Send them here, now, and we will choose what we want," he said, and raised his left hand a little, at which they agreed to his demand.

Then came a time that seemed very long to him, while the crowds in the side streets ebbed and then grew again, pressing closer, and he could do nothing but sit his sweating horse and keep a keen eye out for archers and other threats. At last dismal little groups of boys and women came driven through the streets to the marketplace, two here and three there, weeping and pleading, some even crawling on their hands and knees, goaded forward by whips and kicks. There were five boys in all, none of them more than ten years old, and four women: two little serf girls half dead with fear, and two older women with stained, stinking clothing who came without being driven, maybe thinking life among the witchfolk could not be worse than life as a tanner's slave. And that was all.

Canoc thought it unwise to insist on a better selection to choose from. The longer he was here so hugely outnumbered, the nearer to the time when somebody in the mob of people shot an arrow or threw a stone that hit its mark, and then the crowd would tear them all to pieces.

All the same, he would not be bilked by these merchants.

"There are four women only," he said.

The parleyers whined and argued.

His time was short. He looked about the marketplace and the big houses around it. He saw a woman's face in the window of a narrow house at the corner. She wore a willow-green color that had caught his eye before. She was not hiding, but standing right in the window looking down at him.

"Her," he said, pointing. He pointed with his right hand, but all the people gasped and cowered. That made him laugh. He moved his right hand slowly across the watching faces in a pretense of unmaking them all.

The door of the corner house opened, and the woman in willow-green came out and stood on the step. She was young, small, and thin. Her long hair lay black on her green gown.

"Will you be my wife?" Canoc said to her.

She stood still. "Yes," she said, and came walking slowly across the ruined marketplace to him. She wore strapped black slippers. He held his left hand down to her. She stepped in the stirrup, and he swung her up into the saddle before him.

"The mules and their gear are yours!" he called out to the townsmen, mindful of the gift's gift. From his poverty it was indeed a great gift, though the people of Dunet may well have taken it for a final insolence.

His men had each taken one of the serfs up to ride double with them, and so they set out, riding sedately, in order, the crowds falling away from them in silence, through the street, out from between the house walls, onto the northern road, seeing the mountains before them.

So ended the last raid on the Lowlands from Caspromant. Neither Canoc nor his bride ever went down that road again.

She was named Melle Aulitta. She owned the willow-green dress, the little black slippers she stood in, and a tiny opal on a silver chain around her neck. That was her dowry. He married her four nights after he brought her home to the Stone House. His mother and the housewomen had readied clothing and other things proper for a bride to have, in great haste and with a good will. Brantor Orrec married them in the hall of the Stone House, with all the members of the raiding troop present, and all the people of Caspromant, and whoever could come from the domains of the west to dance at the wedding.

"And then," I said, when my father had finished the story, "Mother had me!"

♦

MELLE AULITTA was born and grew up in Derris Water, fourth of the five daughters of a priest-magistrate of the civic religion of Bendraman. It is a high office, and the priest-magistrate and his wife were well off, bringing up their daughters in leisure and luxury, though very strictly, for the state religion demands modesty, chastity, and obedience of women, and is full of penances and humiliations for those who disobey. Adild Aulitta was a kindly and indulgent father. His highest hope for his girls was that they should be dedicated virgins in the City Temple. Melle was taught reading, writing, some mathematics, a great deal of holy history and poetry, and the elements of urban surveying and architecture, as preparation for that honorable career. She liked learning and was an excellent pupil.

But when she was eighteen, something went awry; something occurred, I don't know what; she never said; she only smiled and passed over the matter. Maybe her tutor fell in love with her and she was blamed for it. Maybe she had a sweetheart and stole out to meet him. Maybe it was a smaller matter even than that. Not the least shadow of a scandal may touch

a postulant virgin of the City Temple, on whose purity the prosperity of all Bendraman depends. I have wondered if Melle may have engineered a little scandal in order to escape the City Temple. In any case, she was sent to stay with distant cousins in the north, in the remote and rural town of Dunet. They too were respectable, proper people, who kept her closer than ever while they bargained and chicaned with local families for a suitable husband for her and brought the candidates in to look her over.

"One of them," she said, "was a little fat man with a pink nose, who trafficked in pigs. Another of them was a tall, tall, thin, thin boy who prayed for an hour eleven times a day. He wanted me to pray with him."

So she looked out of the window, and saw Canoc of Caspromant astride his red stallion, destroying men and houses with a glance. As he chose her, she chose him.

"How did you make your cousins let you go?" I asked, knowing the answer, savoring it in advance.

"They were all lying down on the floor, under the furniture, so that the witch warrior couldn't see them and melt their bones and destroy them. I said, 'Don't fear, Cousin. Is it not said, *a virgin shall save thy house and goods*?' And I went downstairs and outside."

"How did you know Father wouldn't destroy you?"

"I knew," she said.

♦

SHE HAD NO MORE idea of where she was going and what she was getting into than Canoc had when he rode down out of the mountains expecting Dunet to be like our villages—a few huts and hovels, a cattle pen, and nine or ten inhabitants, all gone hunting. Probably she thought she was going to something not very different from her father's house, or at least her cousin's house, a cleanly, warm, bright place, full of company and comforts. How could she have known?

To Lowlanders, the Uplands are an accursed, forgotten corner of a world they left behind long ago. They know nothing of them. A warlike people might have sent an army up to clear out these fearsome, irksome remnants of the past, but Bendraman and Urdile are lands of merchants, farmers, scholars, and priests, not warriors. All they did was turn their back on the

mountains and forget them. Even in Dunet, my mother said, many people no longer believed in the tales of the Men of the Carrantages—goblin hordes sweeping down on the cities of the plain, monsters on horseback, who set whole fields aflame with a sweep of the hand and withered an army with a glance of the eye. All that was long ago, “when Cumbelo was King.” Nothing like that happened these days. People used to trade from Dunet for the fine cream-white Upland cattle, they told her, but the breed had all but died out. The land was terribly poor up there. Nobody lived on the old Upland domains but poor herdsmen and shepherds and farmers scratching a living out of stone.

And that was, as my mother found, the truth. Or a substantial part of it.

But there were many kinds of truth in my mother’s view of things, as many kinds as there were tales to tell.

All the adventures in the stories she told us as children happened “when Cumbelo was King.” The brave young priest-knights who defeated devils in the shape of huge dogs, the fearsome witchfolk of the Carrantages, the talking fish that warned of earthquake, the beggar girl who got a flying cart made out of moonlight, they were all of the time when Cumbelo was King. The rest of her stories were not adventures at all, except for that one, the story in which she herself stepped out of a door and walked across a marketplace. There the two lines of story crossed, the two truths met.

Her stories without adventures were mere descriptions of the tame doings of a stuffy household in a middle-sized city in a sleepy country of the Lowlands. I loved them as well or better than the adventures. I demanded them: Tell about Derris Water! And I think she liked to talk about it not only to please me but to tease and appease her homesickness. She was always a stranger among strange folk, however much she loved them and was beloved. She was merry, joyous, active, full of life; but I know one of her greatest happinesses was to curl up with me on rugs and cushions in front of the small hearth in her sitting room, the round room in the tower, and tell me what they sold in the markets of Derris Water. She told how she and her sisters used to spy on their father getting dressed in all his corsets and paddings and robes and overrobes as priest-magistrate, and how he wobbled walking in the high-soled shoes that made him taller than other men, and how, when he took off the shoes and robes, he shrank. She told how she had gone with family friends on a boat that sailed clear

down the Trond to its mouth where it ran out into the sea. She told me of the sea. She told me that the snailstones we found in quarries and used for gaming pieces were living creatures down on the ocean shore, delicate, colored, shining.

My father would come in from his farm work to her room—with clean hands, and in clean shoes, for she held firmly to certain principles new to the Stone House—and he would sit with us, listening. He loved to listen to her. She talked like a little stream running, clearly and merrily, with the Lowland softness and fluency. To people in the cities, talk is an art and a pleasure, not a matter of mere use and need. She brought that art and pleasure to Caspromant. She was the light of my father's eyes.

Chapter 4

FEUDS AND bonds among the Upland lineages went back before memory, before history, before reason. Caspro and Drum had always been at odds. Caspro, Rodd, and Barre had always been friendly, or friendly enough to mend their feuds after a while.

While Drum had prospered, largely by sheep stealing and land grabbing, these last three families had come on hard times. Their great days seemed to be behind them, especially the Caspros. Even in Blind Caddard's time the strength and numbers of our line had grown perilously small, though we still held our domain and some thirty families of serfs and farmers.

A farmer had some ancestral relation to a lineage, though not necessarily the gift; a serf had neither. Both had the obligation of fealty and the right of claim on the chief family of their domain. The family of most serfs and farmers had lived on the land they farmed as long as the brantor's family or longer. The work and management of crops, livestock, forests, and all the rest were allocated by long custom and frequent council. The people of our domain were seldom reminded that the brantor had power of life or death over them. Caddard's gift of two serfs to Tibro had been a rare and reckless assertion of wealth and power, which saved the domain by catching the invaders in the net of his extravagant generosity. The gift's gift was stronger, perhaps, than the gift itself. Caddard had used it wisely. But things had gone far wrong when a brantor used his power against his own people, as Erroy did at Geremant, and Ogge at Drummant.

The Barre gift had never been very useful for such purposes. To be able to call wild beasts out of the forest, or gentle a colt, or discuss things with a hound, was a gift indeed; but it did not give you dominion over men who could set your haystack afire or kill you and your hound with a glance and a word. The Barres had lost their own domain long ago to the Helvars of

the Carrantages. Various families of the lineage had come down the mountain and married into our western domains. They tried to keep their line true so as not to weaken or lose their gift, but of course they could not always do so. Several of our farmers were Barres. Our healers and curers of livestock, our hen keepers and hound trainers, were all farmwives with Barre blood in them. There were still Barres of the true line at Geremant, Cordemant, and Roddmant.

The Rodds, with their gift of the knife, were well prepared to defend or to attack and to assert dominion if they wished, but they mostly lacked the temper for it. They were not feuders. They were more interested in elk hunts than in forays. Unlike most self-respecting Uplanders, they would rather breed good cattle than steal them. The cream-white oxen Caspromant had once been famous for had in fact been bred by the Rodds. My ancestors stole cows and bull calves from Roddmant till they had a breeding herd of their own. The Rodds worked their land and bred their cattle and throve well enough, but did not increase and grow great. They had intermarried a good deal with Barres, and so it was that when I was a child, Roddmant had two brantors, Gry's mother Parn Barre and her father Ternoc Rodd.

Our families had been on good terms, as these things go in the Uplands, for generations, and Ternoc and my father were true friends. Ternoc had ridden his droop-lipped farmhorse in the great raid on Dunet. His share of the loot was one of the little serf girls, whom he soon gave to Bata Caspro of Cordemant, who had the other one, because the two were sisters and kept sniveling after each other. The year before the raid, Ternoc and Parn had married. Parn had grown up at Roddmant and had some Rodd blood in her. A month after my mother gave birth to me, Parn bore a daughter, Gry.

Gry and I were cradle friends. When we were little children our parents visited often, and we ran off and played. I was the first, I think, to see Gry's gift come to power, though I am not certain if it is a memory or the imagination of something she told me. Children can see what they are told. What I see is this: Gry and I are sitting making twig houses in the dirt at the side of Roddmant kitchen gardens, and a bull elk, a great stag, comes out of the little wood that lies behind the house. He walks to us. He is immense, taller than a house, with great, swaying branches of antlers that balance against the sky. He comes slowly and directly to Gry. She reaches

up and he puts his nose to her palm as if in salute. “Why did he come here?” I ask, and she says, “I called him.” That is all I remember.

When I told my father the memory, years later, he said it could not have been so. Gry and I had been no more than four, and a gift, he said, scarcely ever shows itself till the child is nine or ten years old.

“Caddard was three,” I said.

My mother touched the side of my little finger with the side of her little finger: *Do not contradict your father*. Canoc was tense and anxious, I was careless and bumptious; she protected him from me and me from him, with the most delicate, imperceptible tact.

Gry was the best of playmates. We got into a lot of mild trouble. The worst was when we let the chickens out. Gry claimed she could teach chickens to do all sorts of tricks—walk across lines, jump up onto her finger. “It is my gift,” she said pompously. We were six or seven. We went into the big poultry yard at Roddmant and cornered some half-grown poults and tried to teach them something—anything—anything at all: an occupation so frustrating and absorbing that we never noticed we had left the yard gate wide open until all the hens had followed the rooster right up into the woods. Then everyone had a try at rounding them all back up. Parn, who could have called them, was away on a hunt. The foxes were grateful to us, if no one else was. Gry felt very guilty, the poultry yard being one of her charges. She wept as I never saw her weep again. She roamed in the woods all that evening and the next day, calling the missing hens, “Biddy! Lily! Snowy! Fan!” in a little voice like a disconsolate quail.

We always seemed to get into mischief at Roddmant. When Gry came with her parents or her father to Caspromant, there were no disasters. My mother was very fond of Gry. She would say suddenly, “Stand there, Gry!” Gry would stand still, and my mother would gaze at her till the seven-year-old became self-conscious and began to wriggle and giggle. “Now be still,” my mother would say. “I’m learning you, don’t you see, so that I can have a girl of my own exactly like you. I want to know how to do it.”

“You could have another boy like Orrec,” Gry offered, but my mother said, “No! One Orrec is quite enough. I need a Gry!”

Gry’s mother Parn was a strange, restless woman. Her gift was strong, and she seemed half a wild creature herself. She was much in demand to

call animals to hunters, and was often away, half across the Uplands, at a hunt at one domain or another. When she was at Roddmant she seemed always to have a cage around her, to be looking at you through bars. She and her husband Ternoc were polite and wary with each other. She had no particular interest in her daughter, whom she treated like all other children, with impartial indifference.

"Does your mother teach you how to use your gift?" I asked Gry once, in the self-importance of being taught by my father how to use my gift.

Gry shook her head. "She says you don't use the gift. It uses you."

"You have to learn how to control it," I informed her, solemn and severe.

"I don't," said Gry.

She was wilful, indifferent—too much like her mother, sometimes. She would not argue with me, would not defend her opinion, would not change it. I wanted words. She wanted silence. But when my mother told stories, Gry listened from her silence, and heard every word, heard, held, treasured, pondered it.

"You're a listener," Melle said to her. "Not just a caller, a listener too. You listen to mice, don't you?"

Gry nodded.

"What do they say?"

"Mouse things," Gry said. She was very shy, even with Melle, whom she loved dearly.

"I suppose, being a caller, you could call the mice that are nesting in my storeroom and suggest to them that they go live in the stable?"

Gry thought about it.

"They would have to move the babies," she said.

"Ah," said my mother. "I never thought. Out of the question. Besides, there's the stable cat."

"You could bring the cat to your storeroom," Gry said. Her mind moved unpredictably; she saw as the mice saw, as the cat saw, as my mother saw, all at once. Her world was unfathomably complex. She did not defend her opinions, because she held conflicting opinions on almost everything. And yet she was immovable.

"Could you tell about the girl who was kind to the ants?" she asked my mother, timidly, as if it were a great imposition.

“The girl who was kind to the ants,” my mother repeated, as if reciting a title. She closed her eyes.

She had told us that many of her stories came from a book she had had as a child, and that when she told them, she felt as if she were reading from the book. The first time she told us that, Gry asked, “What is a book?”

So my mother read to us from the book that was not there.

Long, long ago, when Cumbelo was King, a widow lived in a village with her four daughters. And they went along well enough till the woman fell ill and couldn’t get over it. So a wise woman came and looked her over and said, “Nothing can cure you but a drink of the water of the Well of the Sea.”

“Oh me, oh me, then I’ll surely die,” says the widow, “for how can I go to that well, sick as I am?”

“Haven’t you four daughters?” says the wise woman.

So the widow begged her eldest daughter to go to the Well of the Sea and fetch a cup of that water. “And you shall have all my love,” she said, “and my best bonnet.”

So the eldest girl went out, and she walked a while, and sat down to rest, and where she sat she saw a huddle of ants trying to drag a dead wasp to their nest. “Ugh, the nasty things,” she said, and crushed them under her heel, and went on. It was a long way to the shore of the sea, but she trudged along and got there, and there was the sea with its great waves bashing and crashing on the sand. “Oh, that’s enough of that!” said the girl, and she dipped her cup into the nearest wave and carried the water home. “Here’s the water, Mother,” says she, and the mother takes and drinks it. Oh, bitter it was, salt and bitter! Tears came to the mother’s eyes. But she thanked the girl and gave her her best bonnet. And the girl went out in the bonnet, and soon enough she caught her a sweetheart.

But the mother grew sicker than ever, so she asked her second daughter to go fetch her water from the Well of the Sea, and if she did she could have her mother’s love and her best lace gown. So the girl went. On the way she sat down to rest, and saw a man plowing with an ox, and saw the yoke was riding wrong, galling a great sore on the ox’s neck. But that was nothing to her. She went on and came to the shore of the sea. There it was with its great waves roaring and boring on the sand. “Oh, that’s enough of

that!” says she, and dips the cup in quick, and home she trots. “Here’s the water, Mother, now give me the gown.” Salt, salt and bitter that water was, so the mother could scarcely swallow it. As soon as she went out in the lace gown the girl found her a sweetheart, but the mother lay as if under the hand of death. She hardly had breath to ask the third girl to go. “The water I drank can’t be the water of the Well of the Sea,” she said, “for it was bitter brine. Go, and you shall have all my love.”

“I don’t care for that, but give me the house over your head and I’ll go,” says the third daughter.

And the mother said she would. So the girl set off with a good will, straight to the seashore, never stopping. Just on the sand dunes she met a grey goose with a broken wing. It came to meet her, dragging its wing. “Get away, stupid thing,” the girl said, and down to the sea she goes, and sees the great waves thundering and blundering on the sand. “Oh, that’s enough of that!” says the girl, and pops her cup in, and back home she goes. And as soon as her mother tasted the bitter cup of salt sea brine, “Now, out you go, Mother,” says the girl, “this is my house now.”

“Will you not let me die in my own bed, child?”

“If you’ll be quick about it,” says the girl. “But hurry up, for the lad next door wants to marry me for my property, and my sisters and I are going to have a grand wedding here in my house.”

So the mother lay dying, weeping salt and bitter tears. The youngest of her daughters came to her softly and said, “Don’t cry, Mother. I’ll go get you a drink of that water.”

“It’s no use, child. It’s too far, you’re too young, I have nothing left to give you, and I must die.”

“Well, I’ll try all the same,” says the girl, and off she goes.

As she walked along she saw some ants by the roadside, trying to carry the bodies of their comrades, struggling along. “Here, that’s easier for me to do,” says the girl, and she scooped them all up in her hand and carried them to their ant hill and set them down there.

She walked along and saw an ox plowing with a yoke that galled it till it bled. “I’ll set that yoke straight,” she said to the plowman, and she made a pad of her apron to go under the yoke, and set it to ride easier on the ox’s neck.

She walked a long way and came at last to the shore, and there on the dunes of sand stood a grey goose with a broken wing. “Ah, poor bird,” says the girl, and she took off her overskirt and tore it up and bound the goose’s wing so it might heal.

Then she went down to the edge of the sea. There the great waves lay shining. She tasted the seawater and it was salt and bitter. Far out over the waters was an island, a mountain on the shining water. “How can I come to the Well of the Sea?” she said. “I can never swim so far.” But she took off her shoes and was walking into the sea to swim, when she heard a cloppity, clop, and over the sand came a great white ox with silver horns. “Come,” says the ox, “climb up, I’ll carry you.” So she climbed on the ox’s back and held its horns, and into the water they went, and the ox swam till they came to the far island.

The rocks of the island were steep as walls and smooth as glass. “How shall I come to the Well of the Sea?” she said. “I can never climb so high.” But she reached up to try to climb the rocks. A grey goose greater than an eagle came flying down to her. “Come,” says the grey goose, “climb up, I’ll carry you.” So she got up between its wings, and it bore her up to the peak of the island. And there was a deep well of clear water. She dipped her cup in it. And the grey goose bore her back across the sea, while the white ox swam after.

But when the grey goose set foot upon the sand, he stood up a man, a tall, fine young man. And the strips of her skirt hung from his right arm.

“I am the baron of the sea,” he said, “and I would marry you.”

“First I must carry the water to my mother,” the girl said.

So he and she both mounted the white ox, and they rode back to the village. Her mother lay there in death’s hand. But she swallowed one drop of the water, and raised her head. Another drop, and she sat up. Another drop, and she stood up. Another drop, and she danced.

“It is the sweetest water of all the world,” she said. Then she and her youngest daughter and the baron of the sea rode away on the white ox to his palace of silver, where he and the girl were married, and the widow danced at the wedding.

“But the ants,” Gry whispered.

“Oh, the ants,” said my mother. “So, were the ants ungrateful? No! For they came to the wedding too, all crawling along as fast as they could go,

and they brought with them a golden ring, which had lain a hundred years under the ground in their ant hill, and with that ring the young man and the youngest daughter were married!"

"Last time," said Gry.

"Last time?"

"Last time, you said . . . you said the ants went and ate all the cakes and sweet things at the older sisters' wedding."

"They did. They did that, too. Ants can do a great many things, and they're everywhere at once," my mother said earnestly, and then broke into laughter, and we all laughed, because she had forgotten the ants.

Gry's question, "What is a book?" had made my mother think about some matters that had been neglected or ignored in the Stone House. Nobody at Caspromant could read or write, and we counted sheep with a notched stick. It was no shame to us, but it was to her. I don't know if she ever dreamed of going back home for a visit, or of people of her family coming to the Uplands; it was most unlikely that either should happen; but what about the children? What if her son were to go down into the rest of the world, untaught, as ignorant as a beggar of the city streets? Her pride would not endure it.

There were no books in the Uplands, so she made them. She glazed fine linen squares and stretched them between rollers. She made ink of oak galls, pens of goose quills. She wrote out a primer for us and taught us to read it. She taught us to write, first with sticks in the dust, then with quills on stretched linen, holding our breath, scratching and spattering horribly. She washed the pale ink out, and we could write again. Gry found it all very hard, and kept to it only through her love for my mother. I found it the easiest thing in the world.

"Write me a book!" I demanded, and so Melle wrote down the life of Raniu for me. She took her charge seriously. Given her education, she felt that if I had only one book, it should be a holy history. She remembered some of the phrases and language of the *History of the Acts and Miracles of Lord Raniu*, and told the rest in her own words. She gave me the book on my ninth birthday: forty squares of glazed linen, covered edge to edge in pale, formal script, sewn with blue-dyed thread along the top. I pored over it. When I knew it all by heart, still I read and reread it, treasuring the written words not only for the story they told but for what I saw hidden in

them: all the other stories. The stories my mother told. And the stories no one had ever told.

Chapter 5

DURING THESE years, my father also continued my education; but as I showed no signs of being a second Caddard and terrifying the world with my untimely powers, he could only tell me and show me the ways of our gift, and wait in patience till it showed itself in me. He himself had been nine years old, he said, before he could knock a gnat down. He was not a patient man by nature, only by self-discipline, and he was hopeful. He tested me pretty often. I tried my best, glaring and pointing and whispering, summoning up that mysterious thing, my will.

"What is the will?" I asked him.

"Well, it's your intention. You must mean to use your gift. If you used it without willing to, you might do great harm."

"But what does it feel like, to use it?"

He frowned and thought a long time before he spoke.

"It's as if something comes all together," he said. His left hand moved a little, involuntarily. "As if you were a knot at the center of a dozen lines, all of them drawn into you, and you holding them taut. As if you were a bow, but with a dozen bowstrings. And you draw them in tighter, and they draw on you, till you say, 'Now!' And the power shoots out like the arrow."

"So you will your power to go unmake the thing you're looking at?"

He frowned again and thought again. "It's not a matter you can say in words. There's no words in it at all."

"But you say . . . How do you know what to say?"

For I had realised that what Canoc said when he used his gift was never the same word, and maybe not a word at all. It sounded like the *hah!* or hard outbreath of a man making a great, sudden effort with his whole body, yet there was more in it than that; but I could never imitate it.

“It comes when . . . It’s part of the power acting,” was all he could say. A conversation like this troubled him. He could not answer such questions. I should not ask them; I should not have to ask them.

As I turned twelve, and thirteen, I worried increasingly that my gift had not shown itself. My fear was not only in my thoughts but in my dreams, in which I was always just about to do a great, dreadful act of destruction, to bring a huge stone tower crumbling and crashing down, to unmake all the people of some dark, strange village—or I had just done it, and was struggling among ruins and faceless, boneless corpses to find my way home. But always it was before the act of undoing, or after it.

I would wake from such a nightmare, my heart pounding like a horse at the gallop, and try to master my terror and gather the power together, as Canoc had said to do. Shivering so that I could scarcely breathe, I would stare at the carved knob at the foot of my bed, just visible in the dawn light, and raise up my left hand and point at it, and determine to destroy that black knob of wood, and push out my breath in a convulsive *hah!* Then I would shut my eyes hard and pray the darkness that my wish, my will had been granted. But when I opened my eyes at last, the wooden knob stood untouched. My time had not come.

Before my fourteenth year we had had little to do with the people of Drummant. The neighbor with whom we were on terms of watchful enmity was Erroy of Geremant. Gry and I were utterly forbidden to go anywhere near our border with that domain, which ran through an ash wood. We obeyed. We both knew Bent Gonnen, and the man with his arms on backwards. Brantor Erroy had done that in one of his fits of joking—he called it joking. The man was one of his own serfs. “Took the use right out of him,” our farmers said, “a strange way to do.” That was about as far as criticism of a brantor went. Erroy was mad, but nobody said so. They kept quiet and steered clear.

And Erroy kept away from Caspromant. True, he had twisted our serf Gonnen’s back, but Gonnen, whatever he said, had almost certainly been over the line, stealing wood from Geremant. It was, by the code of the Uplands, justification of a sort. My father took no revenge, but went up to the ash wood and waited till Erroy came by and could see what he did. Then Canoc summoned up his power and drew a line of destruction straight across the wood, following the border line, as if a lightning bolt

had run parallel to the ground destroying everything in its path, leaving a fence of dead, ashen, black-leaved trees. He said nothing to Erroy, who was lurking in the upper edge of the wood, watching. Erroy said nothing, but he was never seen near the boundary wood again.

Since the raid on Dunet, my father's reputation as a dangerous man was secure. It did not need this spectacular act of warning to confirm it. "Quick with the eye is Caspro," people said. I was savagely proud when I heard them say it. Proud of him, of us, of our line, our power.

Geremant was a poor, misrun domain, not much to worry about; but Drummant was something else. Drummant was wealthy and growing wealthier. The Drums fancied themselves to be brantors of the Carrantages, people said, with all their airs and arrogance, demanding protection payment here and tribute there—tribute, as if they were overlords of the Uplands! Yet weaker domains ended up buying them off, paying the tribute of sheep or cattle or wool or even serfs that Drum extorted; for the gift of that line was a fearful one. It was slow to act, invisible in action, it lacked the drama of the knife, the undoing, the fire; but Ogge of Drummant could walk across your field and pasture, and next year the corn would wither in the ground, and no grass would grow again for years. He could lay the blight on a flock of sheep, a herd of cattle, a household.

They had all died at Rimmant, a little domain that lay along the southwest border of Drummant. Brantor Ogge had gone there with his demands. The Brantor of Rimm had met him at the door, defiant, ready to use his power of fire throwing, and told him to begone. But Ogge crept round their house at night and made his spells, so they said—for his power was not a matter of a glance and a word, but of whispering and naming and passes of the hands, that took some time to weave. And from that time, every soul of the family of Rimm had sickened, and in four years all were dead.

Canoc doubted this story as it was commonly told. "Drum couldn't do that, in darkness, he outdoors and they in," he said with certainty. "His power is like ours, it works through the seeing eye. Maybe he left some poison there. Maybe they died of illness that was nothing to do with him." But however it happened, Ogge was seen as the cause of it, and certainly got the profit of it, adding Rimmant to his properties.

All this did not concern us directly for a long time. Then the two Corde brothers fell to feuding over who was heir and true brantor of their domain, and Ogge moved some of his people into the southern half of Cordemant, claiming that he was protecting it. The brothers went on quarreling and making claims, fools that they were, while Ogge took over the best part of their land. And that brought Drummant right up against Caspromant, along our southwest border. Now Ogge was our neighbor.

From that time on my father's temper took a turn towards darkness. He felt that we, all the people of his domain, were at risk, and that we had only him to defend us. His sense of responsibility was strong, perhaps exaggerated. To him, privilege was obligation; command was service; power, the gift itself, entailed a heavy loss of freedom. If he had been a young man without wife or child, I think he might have mounted a foray against Drummant, running all the risks at once, staking himself on one free act; but he was a householder, a burdened man, full of the cares of managing a poor estate and looking after its people, with a defenseless wife and no kinsman of his gift to stand with him, except, perhaps, his son.

There was the screw that tightened his anxiety. His son was thirteen years old now and still had shown no sign of his gift.

I had been trained perfectly in the use of it, but I had nothing to use. It was as if I had been taught to ride without ever getting up on a horse's back.

That this worried Canoc sharply and increasingly I knew, for he could not hide it. In this matter, Melle could not be the help and solace to him that she was in everything else, nor could she mediate between the two of us or lessen the load we laid on each other. For what did she know of the gift and the ways it took? It was entirely foreign to her. She was not of Upland blood. She had never seen Canoc use his power but that once, in the marketplace of Dunet, when he killed one attacker and maimed another. He had no wish to show her his power to destroy, and no call to. It frightened her; she did not understand it, perhaps only half believed it.

After he left the line of dead trees in the ash wood to warn Erroy, he had used his power only in small ways to show me how it was done and the cost of doing it. He never used it to hunt game, for the disruption and collapse of the animal's flesh and bones and organs left a horror no one would think of eating. In any event, to his mind, the gift was not for

commonplace usage but for real need only. So Melle could more or less forget he had it, and saw no great reason to worry if I didn't have it.

Indeed, it was only when—at last—she heard that I had shown my power that she was alarmed.

And so was I.

♦

I WAS OUT RIDING with my father, he on the old grey stallion and I on Roanie. With us came Alloc, a young farmer. Alloc was of Caspro lineage through his father, and had "a touch of the eye"—he could unknot knots and a few such tricks. Maybe he could kill a rat if he stared long enough, he said, but he'd never found a rat willing to stay around long enough for him to make sure. He was a good-natured man with a love of horses and a hand with them, the trainer my father had long hoped for. He was on Roanie's last colt. We were training that two-year-old carefully, for my father saw reborn in him the tall red horse he rode to Dunet.

We were out on the southwestern sheep grazings of our domain, keeping an eye out, though Canoc didn't say so, for any sign of men from Drummant straying on our land, or their sheep mixed in among our flocks so that Drum's shepherds could "reclaim" some of ours when they rounded up theirs—a trick we had been warned of by the Cordes, who had long had Drum for a neighbor. We did indeed spot some strangers in among our wiry, rough-wooled Upland ewes. Our shepherds put a spot of yellow-onion stain on the woolly ear so we could tell our sheep from Erroy's, who used to let Gere sheep stray onto our grazing and then claim we had stolen them—though he had not done so since my father marked the ash grove.

We turned south to find our shepherd and his dogs and tell him to cut the Drum sheep out and send them back where they belonged. Then we rode west again to find the break in the fence and get it mended. A black frown was on Canoc's face. Alloc and I came along meek and silent behind him. We were going a pretty good gait along the hillside when Greylag put a forefoot onto slick slate rock hidden by grass and slipped, making a great lurch. The horse recovered, and Canoc kept his seat. He was swinging off to see if Greylag had strained his leg, when I saw on the slanting stone where his foot would touch down an adder poised to strike. I shouted and

pointed, Canoc paused half off the horse, looked at me, at the snake, swung his left hand free and towards it, and recovered his seat on the horse, all in a moment. Greylag made a big, four-footed hop away from the adder.

It lay on the stone like a cast-off sock, limp and misshapen.

Alloc and I both sat on our horses staring, frozen, our left hands out stiffly pointing at the snake.

Canoc quieted Greylag and dismounted carefully. He looked at the ruined thing on the rock. He looked up at me. His face was strange: rigid, fierce.

"Well done, my son," he said.

I sat in my saddle, stupid, staring.

"Well done indeed!" said Alloc, with a big grin. "By the Stone, but that's a wicked great poisonous pissant of a snake and it might have bit the Brantor to the bone!"

I stared at my father's muscular, brown, bare legs.

Alloc dismounted to look at the remains of the adder, for the red colt wouldn't go near it. "Now that's destroyed," he said. "A strong eye did that! Look there, that's its poison fangs. Foul beast," and he spat. "A strong eye," he said again.

I said, "I didn't—"

I looked at my father, bewildered.

"The snake was unmade when I saw it," Canoc said.

"But you—"

He frowned, though not in anger. "It was you that struck it," he said.

"It was," Alloc put in. "I saw you do it, Young Orrec. Quick as lightning."

"But I—"

Canoc watched me, stern and intent.

I tried to explain. "But it was like all the other times, when I tried—when nothing happened." I stopped. I wanted to cry, with the suddenness of the event, and my confusion, for it seemed I had done something I did not know I had done. "It didn't feel any different," I said in a choked voice.

My father continued to gaze at me for a moment; then he said, "It was, though." And he swung up onto Greylag again. Alloc had to catch the red

colt, which didn't want to be remounted. The strange moment passed. I did not want to look at what had been the snake.

We rode on to the line fence and found where the Drum sheep had crossed; it looked as if stones had been pulled out of the wall recently. We spent the morning rebuilding the wall there and in nearby places where it could use a bit of mending.

I was still so incredulous of what I had done that I could not think about it, and was taken by surprise when, that evening, my father spoke of it to my mother. He was brief and dry, as was his way, and it took her a little while to understand that he was telling her that I had shown my gift and maybe saved his life by doing so. Then she, like me, was too bewildered to respond with pleasure or praise, or anything but anxiety. "Are they so dangerous then, these adders?" she said more than once. "I didn't know they were so venomous. They might be anywhere on the hills where the children run about!"

"They are," Canoc said. "They always have been. Not many of them, fortunately."

That our life was imminently and continually in danger was something Canoc knew as a fact, and something Melle had to struggle reluctantly, against her heart, to believe. She was no fool of hope, but she had always been sheltered from physical harm. And Canoc sheltered her, though he never lied to her.

"They gave the old name to our gift," he said now. " 'The adder,' people used to call it." He glanced at me, just the flick of an eye, grave and hard as he had been ever since the instant on the hillside. "Their venom and our stroke act much the same way."

She winced. After a while she said to him, "I know you're glad the gift has run true." It took courage for her to say it.

"I never doubted that it did," he replied. That was said as reassurance to her and to me also, but I am not sure either of us was able to accept it.

I lay awake that night as long as a boy that age can lie awake, going over and over what had happened when I saw the adder, becoming more and more confused and troubled. I slept at last, to dream confused and troubled dreams, and woke very early. I got up and went down to the stables. For once I was there before my father; but he soon came, yawning, rubbing sleep out of his eyes. "Hello, Orrec," he said.

“Father,” I said, “I want to— About the snake.”

He cocked his head a bit.

“I know I used my hand and eye. But I don’t think I killed it. My will— It wasn’t any different. It was just like all the other times.” I began to feel an aching pressure in my throat and behind my eyes.

“You don’t think Alloc did it?” he said. “It’s not in him.”

“But you— You struck it—”

“It was unmade when I saw it,” he said as he had said the day before, but some flicker of consciousness or question or doubt passed through his voice and eyes as he spoke. He considered. The hardness had come back into his face, which had been soft with sleep when I first saw him at the stable doors.

“I struck the snake, yes,” he said. “But after you did. I am sure you struck first. And with a quick, strong hand and eye.”

“But how will I know when I use my power, if it—if it seems just the same as all the times I tried to and didn’t?”

That brought him up short. He stood there, frowning, pondering. Finally he said, almost hesitantly, “Would you try it out, the gift, Orrec, now—on a small thing—on that bit of a weed there?” He pointed to a little clump of dandelions between the stones of the courtyard near the stable door.

I stared at the dandelions. The tears swelled up in me and I could not hold them back. I put my hands over my face and wept. “I don’t want to, I don’t want to!” I cried. “I can’t, I can’t, I don’t want to!”

He came and knelt and put an arm round me. He let me cry.

“It’s all right, my dear,” he said when I grew quieter. “It’s all right. It is a heavy thing.” And he sent me in to wash my face.

We spoke no more about the gift then, or for some while.

Chapter 6

WE WENT back with Alloc for several days after that to mend and build up the fence along our southwest sheep pastures, making it clear to the shepherds on the other side that we knew every stone of those walls and would be aware if one were moved. Along on the third or fourth day of the work, a group of horsemen came towards us up the long falling pastures below the Little Sheer, land that had been the Corde domain and now was Drummant. Sheep trotted away from the riders, blatting hoarsely. The men rode straight at us, their pace increasing as the hilltop leveled. It was a low, misty day. We were sodden with the fine rain that drifted over the hills, and dirty from handling the wet and muddy stones.

"Oh, by the Stone, that's the old adder himself," Alloc muttered. My father shot him a glance that silenced him, and spoke out in a quiet, clear voice as the horsemen cantered right up to the wall—"A good day to you, Brantor Ogge."

All three of us eyed their horses with admiration, for they were fine creatures. The brantor rode a beautiful honey-colored mare who looked too delicate for his bulk. Ogge Drum was a man of about sixty, barrel-girthed and bull-necked. He wore the black kilt and coat, but of fine woven wool, not felt, and his horse's bridle was silver-mounted. His bare calves bulged with muscle. I saw them, mostly, and little of his face, because I did not want to look up into his eyes. All my life I had heard ill of Brantor Ogge; and the way he had ridden straight at us as if in assault, reining in hard just short of the wall, was not reassuring.

"Mending your sheep fence, Caspro?" he said in a big, unexpectedly warm and jovial voice. "A good job too. I have some men good at laying drystone. I'll send them up to help you."

"We're just finishing up today, but I thank you," Canoc said.

"I'll send them up anyhow. Fences have two sides, eh?"

“That they do,” my father said. He spoke pleasantly, though his face was as hard as the stone in his hand.

“One of these lads is yours, eh?” Ogge said, surveying Alloc and me. The insult was subtle. He certainly knew that Canoc’s son was a boy, not a man of twenty. The implication was that there was no way to tell a Caspro son from a Caspro serf, or so we three took it.

“He is,” my father said, and did not name or introduce or even look at me.

“Now that our lands border,” said Ogge, “I’ve had it in mind to come invite you and your lady to visit us at Drummant. If I rode by your house in a day or two, you’d be there?”

“I will,” Canoc said. “You are welcome to come.”

“Good, good. I’ll be by.” Ogge raised his hand in a careless, genial salute, wheeled his mare standing, and led his little troop off at a canter along the wall.

“Ah,” said Alloc with a sigh, “that’s a sweet little yellow mare.” He was as thorough a horseman as my father; the two of them longed and schemed to improve our stable. “If we could put Branty to her in a year or two, what a colt that might be!”

“And what a price it would carry,” Canoc said harshly.

He was tense and often sullen from that day on. He told my mother to make ready for Ogge’s visit, and of course she did so. Then they waited. Canoc did not go far from the Stone House, not wanting her to have to receive Ogge alone. It was half a month before he came.

He brought the same retinue with him, men of his and other lineages of his domain; no women. My father in his stiff pride took that, too, as an insult. He did not let it pass. “I am sorry your wife did not ride with you,” he said. Ogge then made apologies and excuses, saying his wife was much burdened with household cares and had been in ill health. “But she looks forward to welcoming you to Drummant,” he said, turning to Melle. “In the old days there was far more riding about and visiting from domain to domain. We’ve let our old Upland customs of cordiality lapse. It’s a different matter down in the cities, no doubt, where you have neighbors all about you thick as crows on carrion, as they say.”

“Very different,” my mother said meekly, eclipsed by his loud voice and big looming body, which seemed always to contain a repressed threat.

“And this would be your lad I saw the other day,” he said, suddenly turning on me. “Caddard, is it?”

“Orrec,” my mother said, since I was voiceless, though I managed a duck of the head.

“Well, look up, Orrec, let me see your face,” the big voice said. “Afraid of the Drum eye, are you?” He laughed again.

My heart was beating at the top of my chest hard enough to choke me, but I made myself hold my head up and look into the big face that hung over me. Ogge’s eyes were barely visible under heavy, drooping lids. From those creases and pouches they stared out steady and empty as a snake’s eyes.

“And you’ve shown your gift, I hear.” He glanced at my father.

Alloc of course had told everybody on our domain about the adder, and it is amazing how fast word travels from place to place in the Uplands, where it seems that nobody speaks to anybody but their closest kin and not often to them.

“He has,” Canoc said, looking at me not at Ogge.

“So it ran true, in spite of everything,” Ogge said, in such a warm, congratulatory tone that I could not believe he intended the blatant insult to my mother. “The undoing, now—that’s a power I’d like to see! We have only women of the Caspro line at Drummant, as you know. They carry the gift, of course, but can’t show it. Maybe young Orrec here will give us a demonstration. Would you like that, lad?” The big voice was genial, pressing. Refusal was not possible. I said nothing, but in courtesy had to make some response. I nodded.

“Good, then we’ll round up some serpents for you before you come, eh? Or you can clear some of the rats and kittens out of our old barn if you like. I’m glad to know the gift runs true”—this to my father with the same booming geniality—“for I’ve had a thought concerning a granddaughter of mine, my youngest son’s daughter, which we might talk about when you come to Drummant.” He rose. “Now you’ve seen I’m not so much an ogre as maybe you’ve been told”—this to my mother—“you’ll do us the honor of a visit, will you, in May, when the roads are dry?”

“With pleasure, sir,” Melle said, rising also, and she bowed her head above her hands crossed at the fingertips, a Lowland gesture of polite respect, entirely foreign to us.

Ogge stared at her. It was as if the gesture had made her visible to him. Before that he had not really looked at any of us. She stood there respectful and aloof. Her beauty was unlike that of any Upland woman, a fineness of bone, a quickness, a subtle vigor. I saw his big face change, growing heavy with emotions I could not read—amazement, envy, hunger, hate?

He called to his companions, who had been gathered around the table my mother had set for them. They went out to their horses in the courtyard, and all went jangling off. My mother looked at the ruins of the feast. “They ate well,” she said, with a hostess’s pride, but also ruefully, for there was nothing left at all for us of the delicacies she had, with much care and work, provided.

“Like crows on carrion,” Canoc quoted very drily.

She gave a little laugh. “He’s not a diplomat,” she said.

“I don’t know what he is. Or why he came.”

“It seems he came about Orrec.”

My father glanced at me, but I stood planted there, determined to hear.

“Maybe,” he said, clearly trying to defer the discussion at least until I should not be there to hear it.

My mother had no such scruples. “Was he talking of a betrothal?”

“The girl would be of the right age.”

“Orrec’s not fourteen!”

“She’d be a little younger. Twelve or thirteen. But a Caspro through her mother, you see.”

“Two children betrothed to marry?”

“It is nothing uncommon,” Canoc said, his tone getting stiff. “It would be troth only. There’d be no marriage for years.”

“It’s far too young for any kind of arrangement.”

“It can be best to have these things secure and known. A great deal rides on a marriage.”

“I won’t hear of it,” she said quietly, shaking her head. Her tone was not defiant at all, but she did not often declare opposition, and it may have driven my father, tense as he was, farther than he would otherwise have gone.

“I don’t know what Drum wants, but if he proposes a betrothal, it’s a generous offer, and one we must consider. There is no other girl of the true

Caspro lineage in the west.” Canoc looked at me, and I could not help but think of how he looked at colts and fillies, with that thoughtful, appraising gaze, seeing what might come of it. Then he turned away and said, “I only wonder why he should propose it. Maybe he means it as a compensation.”

Melle stared.

I had to think it out. Did he mean compensation for the three women he might have married to keep his lineage true, the women Ogge had snatched away, driving him, in defiance, to go and get himself a bride who was of no lineage at all?

My mother went red, redder than I had ever seen her, so that the clear brown of her skin was dark as a winter sunset. She said carefully, “Have you been expecting—compensation?”

Canoc could be as dense as stone. “It would be just,” he said. “It could mend some fences.” He paced down the room. “Daredan wasn’t an old woman. Not too old to bear Sebb Drum this daughter.” He paced back to us and stood looking down, pondering. “We must consider the offer, if he makes it. Drum is an evil enemy. He might be a good friend. If it’s friendship he offers, I must take it. And the chance for Orrec is better than I could hope.”

Melle said nothing. She had stated her opposition, and there was nothing else to say. If the practice of betrothing children was new and distasteful to her, the principle of making a good marriage for one’s child, the use of marriage for financial and social advantage, was perfectly familiar to her. And in these matters of the amity and enmity between domains and the maintenance of a lineage, she was the foreigner, the outsider, who must trust my father’s knowledge and judgment.

But I had some ideas of my own, and with my mother there, on my side, I spoke out. “But if I got betrothed to that girl at Drummant,” I said, “what about Gry?”

Canoc and Melle both turned and looked at me.

“What about Gry?” Canoc said, with an uncharacteristic pretense of stupidity.

“If Gry and I wanted to get betrothed.”

“You’re far too young!” my mother burst out, and then saw where that took her.

My father stood silent for some while. “Ternoc and I have talked of this,” he said, speaking doggedly, heavily, sentence by sentence. “Gry is of a great line, and strong in her gift. Her mother wishes her to be betrothed to Annren Barre of Cordemant, to keep the lineage true. Nothing has been decided. But this girl at Drummant is of our line, Orrec. That’s a matter of very great weight to me, to you, to our people. It’s a chance we cannot throw away. Drum is our neighbor now, and kinship is a way to friendship.”

“We and Roddmant have *always* been friends,” I said, standing my ground.

“I don’t discount that.” He stood gazing at the despoiled table, undecided for all his decisive speech. “Let it be for now,” he said at last. “Drum may have meant nothing at all. He blows hot and cold at once. We’ll go there in May and know better what’s at stake. It may be I misunderstood him.”

“He is a coarse man, but he seemed to mean to be friendly,” Melle said. “Coarse” was as harsh a word as she used of anyone. It meant she disliked him very much. But she was uncomfortable with distrust, which did not come naturally to her. By seeing goodwill where there was none, often enough she had created it. The people of the household worked with and for her with willing hearts; the sullenest farmers spoke to her cordially, and tight-mouthed old serf women would confide their sorrows to her as to a sister.

I couldn’t wait to go see Gry and talk with her about the visit. I had been kept close to the house while we waited on Ogge’s whim, but usually I was free to go where I pleased, once the work was done; so in the afternoon of the next day, I told my mother I was riding over to Roddmant. She looked at me with her clear eyes, and I blushed, but she said nothing. I asked my father if I could take the red colt. I felt an unusual assurance as I spoke to him. He had seen me show the gift of our lineage, and heard me spoken of as a potential bridegroom. It didn’t surprise me when he said I could ride the colt, without reminding me to keep him from shying at cattle and to walk him after I let him run, as he would have reminded me when I was a boy of thirteen, instead of a man of thirteen.

Chapter 7

I SET OFF, like any man, full of cares and self-importance. The colt Branty had lovely, springy gaits. On the open slopes of Long Meadows, his canter was a dipping flow like a bird's flight. He ignored the staring cattle; he behaved perfectly, as if he too respected my new authority. I was pleased with both of us as we came, still at a canter, to the Stone House of Roddmant. A girl ran in to tell Gry I had come, while I walked Branty slowly round the courtyard to cool him off. He was such a tall, grand-looking horse, he made the person with him feel grand and admirable too. I strutted like a peacock as Gry came running across the yard to greet us with delight. The colt of course responded to her gift: he looked at her with great interest, ears forward, took a step towards her, bowed his head a little, and pushed his big forehead up against hers. She received the salutation gravely, rubbed his topknot, blew gently into his nostrils, and talked to him with the soft noises she called creature talk. To me she said nothing, but her smile was bright.

"When he's cooled off, let's go to the waterfall," I said, and so when Branty had been established in a stall in the stable with a bit of hay and a handful of oats, Gry and I set off up the glen. A mile or so up the mill creek the two feeders came together in a dark, narrow cleft, and leapt down from boulder to boulder to a deep pool. Cool, ceaseless wind from the falling water kept the wild azalea and black willow bushes nodding. Among them a little bird that sang a three-note song was always hidden, and an ouzel nested by the lower pool. As soon as we got there we went wading, and then ducked under the falls, and climbed the rocks, and swam and scrambled and shouted, and finally clambered up to a high, broad ledge that jutted into the sunlight. There we stretched out to get dry. It was a day of early spring, not very warm, and the water had been icy, but we were like otters, never really feeling the cold.

We had no name for that ledge, but it had been our talking place for years now.

For a while we lay and panted and soaked up the sunlight. But I was full of what I had to say, and soon enough began to say it. “Brantor Ogge Drum called on us yesterday,” I informed Gry.

“I saw him once,” she said. “When Mother took me on a hunt there. He looks like he’d swallowed a barrel.”

“He’s a powerful man,” I said stuffily. I wanted her to recognise Ogge’s grandeur, so that she would give me due credit for sacrificing my chance to become his son-in-law. But after all, I hadn’t yet told her about that. Now that it was time to tell her, I found it difficult.

We lay on our bellies on the warm, smooth rock, like two skinny lizards. Our heads were close together so that we could speak quietly, as Gry liked to do. She was not secretive, and could yell like a wildcat, but she liked talk to be soft.

“He invited us to Drummant in May.”

No response.

“He said he wanted me to meet his granddaughter. She’s a Caspro through her mother.” I heard the echo of my father’s voice in mine.

Gry made an indistinct sound and said nothing for a long time. Her eyes were shut. Her damp hair was tangled over the side of her face that I could see; the other side was pillowed on the rock. I thought she was going to sleep.

“Are you going to?” she murmured.

“Meet his granddaughter? Of course.”

“Be betrothed,” she said, still with her eyes shut.

“No!” I said, indignant but uncertain.

“Are you sure?”

After a pause I said, “Yes,” with less indignation, but no more certainty.

“Mother wants to betroth me,” Gry said. She turned her head so that she was looking straight before her, with her chin resting on the stone.

“To Annren Barre of Cordemant,” I said, pleased with myself for knowing this. It did not please Gry. She hated to know that anyone talked about her. She wanted to live invisibly, like the bird in the black willows. She said nothing at all, and I felt foolish. I said by way of apology, “My father and your father have talked about it.” Still she said nothing. She had

asked me, why shouldn't I ask her? But it was hard to. Finally I forced myself. "Are you going to?"

"I don't know," she muttered through closed teeth, her chin on the stone, her gaze straight ahead.

A fine reward, I thought, for my saying no so staunchly to her question. I was ready to give up Drum's granddaughter for Gry, but Gry wasn't willing to give up this Annren Barre for me? That hurt me sorely. I broke out, "I always thought—" Then I stopped.

"So did I," Gry murmured. And after a while, so softly her words were almost lost in the noise of the falls, "I told Mother I wouldn't be betrothed till I was fifteen. To anybody. Father agreed. She's angry."

She suddenly turned over onto her back and lay gazing up into the sky. I did the same. Our hands were close, lying on the rock, but did not touch.

"When you're fifteen," I said.

"When we're fifteen," she said.

That was all we said for a long time.

I lay in the sun and felt happiness like the sunlight shining through me, like the strength of the rock under me.

"Call the bird," I murmured.

She whistled three notes, and from the nodding thickets below us came the sweet, prompt reply. After a minute the bird called again, but Gry did not answer.

She could have called the bird to her hand, to perch on her finger, but she did not. When she began to come into her full power, last year, we used to play all kinds of games with her gift. She would have me wait in a clearing in the woods, not knowing what I was to see, watching with the hunter's strained alertness, till all at once, always startling me, a doe and her fawns would be standing at the edge of the clearing. Or I'd smell fox and look all about till I saw the fox sitting in the grass not six feet from me, demure as a house cat, his tail curled elegantly round his paws. Once I smelled some rank odor that made the hair stand up on my head and arms, and saw a brown bear come across the clearing, heavy-footed, soft-footed, without a glance at me, and vanish into the forest. Gry would slip into the clearing presently, smiling shyly— "Did you like that?" In the case of the bear, I admitted that I thought one was enough. She said only, "He lives on the west spur of Mount Airn. He followed the Spate down here, fishing."

She could call a hawk down off the wind, or bring the trout of the waterfall pool up to leap in air. She could guide a swarm of bees wherever the beekeeper wanted them. Once, in a mischievous mood, she kept a cloud of gnats pursuing a shepherd all across the boglands below Red Cairn. Hidden up in the cairn, watching the poor fellow's swats and starts and windmilling arms and mad rushes to escape, we snorted and wept with heartless laughter.

But we had been children then.

Now, as we lay side by side gazing up at the bright sky and the sprays of restless leaves that nodded across it, the warm rock under us and the warm sun on us, through my peaceful happiness crept the thought that I had come with more than one thing to tell Gry. We had spoken of betrothals. But neither I nor she had said anything about my coming into my power.

That was more than half a month ago now. I had not seen Gry in all that time, first because I had been going out with my father and Alloc to mend the sheep fences, and then because we had had to wait at home for Ogge's visit. If Ogge had heard about the adder, surely Gry had. Yet she had said nothing. And I had said nothing.

She was waiting for me to speak, I thought. And then I thought maybe she was waiting for me to show my power. To display it, as she had done so simply and easily, whistling to the bird. But I can't, I thought, all the warmth draining out of me, my peacefulness lost. I can't do it. At once I got angry, demanding, Why do I have to do it? Why do I have to kill something, ruin it, destroy it? Why is that my gift? I won't, I won't do it! — But all you have to do is untie a knot, a colder voice said in me. Have Gry tie a hard knot in a bit of ribbon, and then undo it with a glance. Anyone with the gift can do that. Alloc can do that— And the angry voice repeated, I won't, I don't want to, I won't!

I sat up and put my head in my hands.

Gry sat up beside me. She scratched at a nearly healed scab on her thin brown leg, and spread out her thin brown toes fanwise for a minute. I was deep in my own sudden fear and anger, yet was aware that she wanted to say something, that she was bringing herself to speak.

"I went with Mother to Cordemant last time," she said.

"You saw him then."

"Who?"

“That Annren.”

“Oh, I’ve seen him before,” she said, utterly dismissing that subject. “It was for a big hunt. Elk. They wanted us to bring the herd that comes down the Renny from Airnside. They had six crossbowmen. Mother wanted me to come. She wanted me to call the elk. I didn’t want to. But she said I had to. She said people wouldn’t believe I had the gift if I didn’t use it. I said I’d rather train horses. She said anybody can train horses, but they need us to call the elk. She said, ‘You can’t withhold the gift from need.’ So I went with the hunt. And I called the elk.” She seemed to be watching the elk come pacing to her through the air, on our high perch. She gave a deep sigh. “They came . . . The bowmen shot five of them. Three young bulls and an old bull and a cow. Before we left they gave us a lot of meat, and presents—a cask of mead, and yarn, and woven goods. They gave me a beautiful shawl. I’ll show it to you. Mother was really happy about the hunt. They gave us a knife, too. It’s a beauty. It has an elkhorn handle mounted in silver. Father says it’s an old war dagger. They sent it for him, as a kind of joke. Hanno Corde said, ‘You give to our need, we give to your not-need!’ But Father likes it.” Hugging her knees, she sighed again, not unhappily, yet as if something oppressed her.

I didn’t know why she had told me the story. Not that she needed a particular reason; we told each other everything that happened to us, everything we thought. She was not boasting; she never boasted. I did not know what the elk hunt had meant to her, if she was happy about it or proud of it or not. Maybe she didn’t know herself, and told the story to find out. Maybe by telling it she was asking for my story, my triumph. But I could not tell it.

“When you call,” I said, and stopped.

She waited.

“What does it feel like?”

“I don’t know.” She didn’t understand my question; I hardly did myself.

“The first time your gift worked,” I said, trying another tack, “did you know it was working? Was it sort of different from, from the times it didn’t work?”

“Oh,” she said. “Yes.” But nothing more.

I waited.

“It just works,” she said. She frowned, and wriggled her toes, and thought, and finally said, “It’s different from your gift, Orrec. You have to use the eye, and . . .”

She hesitated and I filled in, “Eye, hand, word, will.”

“Yes. But with calling, you just have to find where the creature is, and think about it, and of course it’s different with each one, but it’s just sort of like reaching out, or like calling aloud, only you don’t use your hand, or your voice, mostly.”

“But you know when it’s working.”

“Yes. Because they’re there. You know where they are. You feel it. And they answer. Or they come . . . It’s like a line between you and them. A cord, a string, from here,” and she touched her breastbone, “between you and them. Stretched. Like a string on a fiddle—you know? If you just touch it, it calls out?” I must have looked blank. She shook her head. “It’s hard to talk about!”

“But you know you’re doing it, when you do it.”

“Oh yes. Even before I could call, sometimes I could feel the string. Only it wasn’t stretched enough. It wasn’t tuned.”

I sat hunched up, despairing. I tried to say something about the adder. No words would come.

Gry said, “What was it like when you killed the adder?”

So simply, she gave me my release from silence.

I could not accept it. I started to speak, and broke into tears. Only for a moment. The tears made me angry, shamed me. “It wasn’t like anything,” I said. “It was just—just nothing. Easy. Everybody makes this fuss about it. It’s stupid!”

I stood up and walked right to the end of the ledge of rock, put my hands on my knees and stooped far over to look down to the pool below the falls. I wanted to do something daring, courageous, foolhardy. “Come on!” I said, turning. “Race you to the pool!” Gry was up and off the rock quick as a squirrel. I won the race, but skinned both knees doing it.

♦

I RODE BRANTY HOME over the sunlit hills, and walked him to cool him down, toweled him and brushed him, watered him and fed him, left him

whuffling at Roanie in his stall, and came in conscious of having fulfilled my responsibilities, as a man should do. My father said nothing, and that too was as it should be: he took it for granted that I had done what should be done. After supper Mother told us a story from the *Chamhan*, the saga of the Bendraman people, which she knew pretty well from beginning to end. She told of the hero Hamneda's raid on the demon city, his defeat by the demon king, his flight into the wasteland. My father listened as intently as I did. I remember that evening as the last—the last of the good days? the last of my childhood? I don't know what came to an end there, but I woke next morning into a different world.

"Come out with me, Orrec," my father said late in the morning, and I thought he meant we would ride together, but he only walked with me some way towards the ash grove, till we were out of sight of the house, in the lonely, grassy swale of the Ashbrook. He said nothing as we walked. He stopped on the hillside above the brook. "Show me your gift, Orrec," he said.

I've said that obedience to my father had always been a pleasure to me, though often not an easy pleasure. And it was a very deep habit, a lifelong, unbroken custom. I had simply never thought of disobeying him, never wanted to. What he asked of me, even if difficult, was always possible, and even if incomprehensible, always turned out to be reasonable, to be right. I understood what he was asking of me now, and why he asked it. But I would not do it.

A flint stone and a steel blade may lie side by side for years, quiet as can be, but strike them together and the spark leaps. Rebellion is an instant thing, immediate, a spark, a fire.

I stood facing him, the way I always stood when he spoke my name that way, and said nothing.

He gestured to a ragged clump of grasses and bindweed near us. "Unmake that," he said, his tone not commanding but encouraging.

I stood still. After one glance at the clump of weeds, I did not look back at it.

He waited some while. He drew breath, and there was some slight change in his stance, an increase of tension, though he still said nothing.

"Will you do it?" he said at last, very softly.

"No," I said.

Silence between us again. I heard the faint music of the brook and a bird singing away over in the ash grove and a cow lowing down in the home pasture.

“Can you do it?”

“I won’t.”

Silence again, and then he said, “There’s nothing to fear, Orrec.” His voice was gentle. I bit my lip and clenched my hands.

“I’m not afraid,” I said.

“To control your gift you must use it,” Canoc said, still with that gentleness that weakened my resolve.

“I won’t use it.”

“Then it may use you.”

That was unexpected. What had Gry told me about using her gift and being used by it? I could not remember now. I was confused, but I would not admit it.

I shook my head.

Then at last he frowned. His head went back as if he faced an opponent. When he spoke, the tenderness had gone out of his voice. “You must show your gift, Orrec,” he said. “If not to me, to others. It’s not your choice to make. To have the power is to serve the power. You’ll be Brantor of Caspromant. The people here will depend on you as they do on me now. You must show them they can rely on you. And learn how to use your gift by using it.”

I shook my head.

After another unbearable silence, he said, almost in a whisper, “Is it the killing?”

I didn’t know whether it was that, the idea that my gift was to kill, to destroy, that I rebelled against. I had thought that, but not very clearly, though I had often thought with sick horror of the rat, the adder. . . . All I knew by now was that I refused to be tested, refused to try out this terrible power, refused to let it be what I was. But Canoc had given me an out, and I took it. I nodded.

At that he gave a deep sigh, his only sign of disappointment or impatience, and turned away. Then he fished in his coat pocket and brought out a bit of lacing. He always carried ends of cord for all the

thousand uses of a farmstead. He knotted it and tossed it onto the ground between us. He said nothing, but looked at it and at me.

“I’m not a dog, to do tricks for you!” I burst out in a shrill, loud voice. It left an awful, ringing silence between us.

“Listen, Orrec,” he said. “At Drummant, that’s what you’ll be, if you choose to see it that way. If you don’t show your gift there, what will Ogge think, and say? If you refuse to learn the use of your power, our people will have no one to turn to.” He took a deep breath, and for a moment his voice shook with anger. “Do you think *I* like killing rats? Am I a terrier?” He stopped, and looked aside, and finally said, “Think of your duty. Of our duty. Think of it, and when you’ve understood it, come to me.”

He stooped and picked up the length of cord, unknotted it with his fingers, put it back in his pocket, and strode away, uphill, towards the ash grove.

When I remember that now, I think of how he saved that bit of lacing, because cord was hard to come by and must not be wasted, and I could cry again; but not with the tears of shame and fury that I wept as I went down the stream valley from that place, that day.

Chapter 8

AFTER THAT nothing could be the same between my father and me, because now there lay between us his demand and my refusal. But his manner to me did not change. He did not return to the matter for several days. When he did it was not to command but to ask almost casually, one afternoon when we were riding back from our eastern boundary: “Are you ready to try your power now?”

But my determination had grown up round me like a wall, a stone tower-keep in which I was protected from his demands, his questions, my own questions. I answered at once: “No.”

My flat certainty must have taken him aback. He said nothing in reply. He said nothing to me as we rode on home. He said nothing to me the rest of that day. He looked tired and stern. My mother saw that, and probably guessed the cause.

The next morning she asked me to come up to her room on the pretext of fitting the coat she was making for me. While she had me standing with my arms stuck out like a straw doll and was going round me on her knees taking out basting stitches and marking buttonholes, she said through the pins in her mouth, “Your father’s worried.”

I scowled and said nothing.

She took the pins out of her mouth and sat back on her heels. “He says he doesn’t know why Brantor Ogge acted as he did. Inviting himself here, and inviting us there, and dropping hints about his granddaughter, and all. He says there’s never been any friendship between Drum and Caspro. I said, ‘Well, better late than never.’ But he just shakes his head. It worries him.”

This was not what I’d expected, and it drew me from my self-absorption. I didn’t know what to say but sought for something wise and

reassuring. “Maybe it’s because our domains border now,” was the best I could come up with.

“I think that’s what worries him,” Melle said. She replaced one pin between her lips and set another in the hem of the jacket. It was a man’s coat of black felt, my first.

“So,” she said, removing the pin from her mouth and sitting back again to judge the fit, “I’ll be very glad when this visit’s over with!”

I felt guilt weigh me down, as if the black coat were made of lead.

“Mother,” I said, “he wants me to practice the gift, the undoing, and I don’t want to, and it makes him angry.”

“I know,” she said. She went on adjusting the hang of the jacket, and then stopped and looked at me, up at me, because she was kneeling and I standing. “That’s something I can’t help either of you with. You see that, don’t you, Orrec? I don’t understand it. I can’t meddle in it. I can’t come between you and your father, either. It’s hard, when I see you both unhappy. All I can say to you is, it’s for you, for all of us, that he asks this of you. He wouldn’t ask it if it were wrong. You know that.”

She had to take his part and his side, of course. It was right, and just, but also it was unfair, unfair to me, that all the power should be on his side, all the right, all the reasons, that even she had to be on his side—leaving me alone, a stupid, stubborn boy, unable to use my power, claim my right, or speak my reasons. Because I saw that unfairness, I would not even try to speak. I drew away, into my furious shame, my stone tower, and stood mute inside it.

“Is it because you don’t want to harm creatures that you don’t want to use your power, Orrec?” she asked, quite timidly. Even with me she was timid, humble before this uncanny gift she knew so little of.

But I would not answer her question. I did not nod or shrug or speak. She glanced into my face, then looked back at her work and finished it in silence. She slipped the half-made jacket off my shoulders, held me briefly to her, kissed my cheek, and let me go.

Twice after that, Canoc asked me if I would try my gift. Twice I silently refused. The third time he did not ask, but said, “Orrec, you must obey me now.”

I stood silent. We were not far from the house, but no one else was around. He never tested or shamed me before other people.

“Tell me what you’re afraid of.”

I stood silent.

He faced me, close to me, his eyes blazing, so much pain and passion in his voice that it struck me like the lash of a whip: “Are you afraid of your power or afraid you don’t have the power?”

I caught my breath and cried out, “I am not afraid!”

“Then use your gift! Now! Strike anything!” He flung out his right hand. His left was clenched and held to his side.

“No!” I said, shaking and shivering, holding both my clenched hands to my chest, ducking my head because I could not stand the blaze of his eyes.

I heard him turn and go. His steps went down the path and into the courtyard of the house. I did not look up. I stood staring and staring at a little clump of broom just leafing out in the April sunlight. I stared at it and thought of it black, dead, withered, but I did not lift my hand, or use my voice or my will. I only stared at it and saw it green, alive, indifferent.

After that he did not ask me again to use my power. Everything went on as usual. He spoke to me much as usual. He did not smile or laugh, and I could not look into his face.

I went to see Gry when I could, riding Roanie because I didn’t want to ask if I could ride the colt. A hound bitch at Roddmant had whelped a monstrous litter of pups, fourteen of them; they were well past the weaning stage, but still very funny and foolish, and we played with them a good deal. I was making much of one of them when Ternoc stopped by to watch us. “Here, take the pup,” he said, “take it home with you. We could use a few less, to be sure, and Canoc said he might be wanting a hound or two. That’s a likely young dog, I’d say.” He was the prettiest of the lot, pure black and tan. I was delighted.

“Take Biggie,” Gry said. “He’s a lot smarter.”

“But I like this one. He’s always kissing me.” The puppy obliged, washing my face quite thoroughly.

“Kissie,” Gry said, without enthusiasm.

“No, he’s not Kissie! He’s . . .” I sought a heroic name and found it. “He’s Hamneda.”

Gry looked dubious and uneasy, but she never argued. So I carried the long-legged black-and-tan puppy home in a basket on the saddle, and for a little while he was my solace and playmate. But of course I should have

heeded Gry, who knew her dogs as no one else could know them. Hamneda was hopelessly backward and excitable. He not only pissed on the floor like any puppy, but soiled anywhere and everywhere, so that he soon had to be forbidden the house; he hurt himself, got between the horses' feet, killed our best stable mouser and her kittens, bit the gardener and the cook's little boy, and exasperated everyone with the meaningless, shrill barking and whining he kept up day and night, which grew even worse when he was shut up to keep him out of trouble. He could not learn to do, or not do, anything at all. I was sick to death of him after a halfmonth. I wished I was rid of him, but was ashamed to admit, even to myself, my disloyalty to the hapless, brainless dog.

Alloc and I were to ride with my father one morning up to the high pastures to check on the spring calving there. As usual my father rode Greylag, but this time he told Alloc to take Roanie while I rode the colt. That was a dubious privilege, this morning. Branty was in a vile temper. He tossed his head, he held his breath, he kicked out and tried to bite, he bucked when I mounted, he sidled and backed and embarrassed me in every way. Just as I thought I had him under control, Hamneda burst out from somewhere and came leaping straight at the colt, yapping, a broken leash flailing all about him. I yelled at the dog as Branty reared right up, unseating me. I managed not to fall, and to regain my seat, and to rein the scared colt in, all in a wild flurry. When Branty finally stood still, I looked for the dog and saw a heap of black and tan on the courtyard pavement.

"What happened?" I said.

My father, sitting his horse, looked at me. "Do you not know?"

I stared at Hamneda. I thought Branty must have trampled him. But there was no blood. He lay boneless, shapeless. One long black-and-tan leg lay like limp rope. I swung off the horse, but I could not go nearer that thing lying on the pavement.

I stared up at my father and cried out, "Did you have to kill him?"

"Was it I?" Canoc said, in a voice that turned me cold.

"Ah, Orrec, it was you," said Alloc, bringing Roanie over closer—"sure enough, you flung out your hand, you were saving the horse from the fool of a dog!"

"I did not!" I said. "I did—I did not kill him!"

“Do you know whether you did or not?” Canoc said, almost jeering, it seemed.

“It was just as when you destroyed the adder, sure enough,” Alloc said. “A quick eye!” But his voice was a little uneasy or unhappy. People had come into the courtyard from the house and outside, hearing the commotion, and stood staring. The horses fretted, wanting to stand away from the dead dog. Branty, whom I held close at the bridle, was shivering and sweating, and so was I. All at once I turned away and vomited, but I did not let go the reins. When I had wiped my mouth and got my breath, I led Branty to the mounting stone and got back up in the saddle. I could barely speak, but I said, “Are we going?”

And we rode on up to the high pastures, in silence all the way.

That evening I asked where they had buried the dog. I went to the place, out past the midden, and stood there. I could not grieve much for poor Hamneda, but there was a terrible grief in me. When I started back to the house in the late dusk, my father was on the path.

“I’m sorry about your dog, Orrec,” he said in his grave, quiet voice.

I nodded.

“Tell me this: did you will to destroy him?”

“No,” I said, but I did not speak with entire certainty, because nothing was clear or certain to me any more. I had hated the dog for his idiocy, for scaring the colt, but I had not wanted to kill him for it, had I?

“Yet you did.”

“Without meaning to?”

“You didn’t know you were using your gift?”

“No!”

He had turned to walk with me, and we went on towards the house in silence. The spring twilight was sweet and cold. The evening star hung near the young moon in the west.

“Am I like Caddard?” I asked in a whisper.

He took a long time to answer. “You must try to learn the use of the gift, to control it,” he said.

“But I can’t. Nothing happens when I try to use it, Father! I’ve tried and tried— It’s only when I don’t try—when it’s something like the adder—or today—and it doesn’t seem like I do anything—it just happens—”

The words all came at once, the stones of my tower-keep clattering down around me.

Canoc did not reply except with a little sound of compunction. He put his hand lightly on my shoulder as we walked. As we came to the gate, he said, “There is what they call the wild gift.”

“Wild?”

“A gift not controlled by the will.”

“Is it dangerous?”

He nodded.

“What do—what do you do about it?”

“Have patience,” he said, and again his hand was on my shoulder for a moment. “Take courage, Orrec. We’ll find out what we must do.”

It was a relief to know my father was not angry with me, and to be free of that furious resistance to him in myself; but what he had said was frightening enough to leave me little comfort that night. When in the morning he summoned me to go with him, I came readily. If there was something I could do, I would do it.

He was silent and stern that morning. I thought it was all to do with me, of course, but he said as we walked towards the Ashbrook vale: “Dorec came this morning. He says two of the white heifers are missing.”

The heifers were of the old Rodd stock, three beautiful creatures, for which Canoc had traded a big piece of good woodland on our border with Roddmant. He was hoping to build up a herd of those cattle again at Caspromant. The three had been pastured this last month in a bit of fat grassland at the south edge of the domain, near the sheep grazings. A serf woman and her son whose cottage was near that pasture kept an eye on them along with the five or six milch cows she kept there.

“Did they find a break in the fences?” I asked.

He shook his head.

The heifers were the most valuable thing we had, aside from Greylag, Roanie, and Branty, and the land itself. The loss of two of them would be a hard blow to Canoc’s hopes.

“Are we going to go look for them?”

He nodded. “Today.”

“They might have got up onto the Sheer—”

“Not by themselves,” he said.

“Do you think . . .” I did not go on. If the heifers had been stolen, there were all too many likely thieves. The likeliest, in that part of the domain, would be Drum or some of his people. But speculation about cattle thieving was a risky thing. Murderous feuds had been started over a careless word, not even an accusation. Though my father and I were alone, the habit of discretion in these matters was strong. We said nothing more.

We came to the same spot we had stopped at days ago, when I first defied him. He said, “Will you—” and stopped, completing his question with an almost pleading look at me. I nodded.

I looked about. The hillside rose gently up, grassy and stony, hiding the higher slopes above it. A little ash tree had got a foothold near the path and was struggling to grow there by itself, spindly and dwarfed, but putting out its leaf buds bravely. I looked away from it. There was an ant hill by the path ahead of us. It was early morning yet, and the big, reddish-black ants were still boiling in and out of the opening at the top, forming lines, hurrying along on their business. It was a large hill, a mound of bare clay standing a foot tall. I had seen the ruins of such insect cities and could imagine the tunnels underground, the complex galleries and passages, the dark architecture. In that instant, not giving myself time to think, I stretched out my left hand and stared at the ant hill and the breath burst from my lips in a sharp sound as I struck with all my will to unmake, undo, destroy it.

I saw the green grass in the sunlight, the dwarf ash tree, the bare brown ant hill, the reddish-black ants hurrying in and out of its narrow mouth, going and coming in straggling columns through the grass and across the path.

My father was standing behind me. I did not turn around. I heard his silence. I could not bear it.

In a passion of frustration, I shut my eyes tight, wishing I need never see this place again, the ants, the grass, the path, the sunlight—

I opened my eyes and saw the grass curl and turn black, the ants stop and shrivel up into nothing, their hill collapsing into dusty caverns. The ground seemed to writhe and boil before me up the hillside with a cracking, splitting rattle, and something that stood before me shuddered and twisted and turned black. My left hand was still out stiff, pointing

before me. I clenched it, brought both hands up over my face. “Stop it! Stop it!” I shouted.

My father’s hands were on my shoulders. He held me against him. “There,” he said, “there. It’s done, Orrec. It’s done.” I could feel that he was shaking, as I was, and his breath came short.

When I took my hands away from my eyes, I turned my head away at once, terrified by what I saw. Half the hillside before us was as if a whirlwind of fire had swept across it—ruined, withered—a litter of split pebbles on dead ground. The ash tree was a split black stump.

I turned around and hid my face against my father’s chest. “I thought it was you, I thought it was you standing there!”

“What is it, son?” He was very gentle, keeping his hands on me as he would with a scared foal, talking quietly.

“I would have killed you!— But I didn’t, I didn’t mean to! I didn’t *do* it! I did it but I didn’t will it! What can I do!”

“Listen, listen, Orrec. Don’t be afraid. I won’t ask you again—”

“But it’s no use! I can’t control it! I can’t do it when I want to do it and then when I don’t want to do it I do! I don’t dare look at you! I don’t dare look at anything! What if I—what if I—” But I couldn’t go on. I sank right down on the ground paralysed by terror and despair.

Canoc sat down on the dirt of the path beside me and let me recover myself by myself.

I sat up at last. I said, “I am like Caddard.”

It was a statement and a question.

“Maybe—” my father said, “maybe like Caddard was as a child. Not as he was when he killed his wife. He was mad then. But as a young child, it was his gift that was wild. It wasn’t under his control.”

I said, “They blindfolded him till he learned how to control it. You could blindfold me.”

After I said it, it seemed a crazy thing, and I wanted it unsaid. But I raised my head and looked at the hillside in front of me, a broad swathe of dead grass and withered shrubs, dust and shattered stones, a formless ruin. Any living thing that had been there was dead. All the delicate, coherent, complex shapes of the things that had been there were destroyed. The ash tree was a hideous, branchless stump. I had done that and not known I was doing it. I had not willed to do it, yet I had done it. I had been angry . . .

I shut my eyes once more. “It would be best,” I said.

Perhaps there was some hope in me that my father would have a different, a better plan. But, after a long time, and in a low voice as if ashamed that it was all he could say, he said, “Maybe for a while.”

Chapter 9

NEITHER OF us was ready to do what we had spoken of doing or even to think about it yet. There was the matter of the heifers, strayed or stolen. Of course I wanted to ride with him to look for them, and he wanted me with him. So we went back to the Stone House and mounted, along with Alloc and a couple of other young men, and were off without another word about what had happened beside the Ashbrook.

But all that long day from time to time I would look at the green vales, the willows along the streams, the heather in blossom and the early yellow broom flowers, and up to the blue and brown of the great hills, scanning for the heifers, but at the same time afraid of looking, afraid of staring too hard, of seeing the grass blacken and the trees wither in an invisible flame. Then I would look away, look down, clench my left hand to my side, close my eyes a moment, try to think of nothing, see nothing.

It was a weary day, fruitless. The old woman who had been charged with guarding the heifers was so terrified of Canoc's anger that she couldn't say anything that made sense. Her son, who should have been watching over them in the pasture near Drummant land, had been up on the mountain hunting hares. We found no break in the fences where the cattle might have got through, but they were old stone fences with palings along the top which could have been easily pulled out and replaced by thieves covering their tracks. Or the heifers, still young and adventurous, might have simply wandered off up one of the glens and be peacefully grazing away somewhere on the vast, folded slopes of the East Sheer. But in that case, it was odd that one of them had stayed behind. Cattle follow one another. The one pretty young cow left, shut up now, too late, in the barnyard, mooed mournfully from time to time, calling her friends.

Alloc and his cousin Dorec and the old woman's son were left to search the high slopes, while my father and I rode home a roundabout way that

took us clear up along our border with Drummant, keeping an eye out for white cattle all the way. Now, as I rode, whenever we were on high ground I stretched my gaze westward looking for the heifers, and thought what it would be like not to be able to do that: not to be able to look: to see only blackness no matter how I looked. What good would I be then? Instead of helping my father, I would be a burden to him. That thought was hard. I began thinking of things that I would not be able to do, and from that began thinking of things that I would not be able to see, thinking of them one by one: this hill, that tree. The round grey crest of Mount Airn. The cloud over it. The twilight gathering round the Stone House as we rode down the glen towards it. Dim yellow light in a window. Roanie's ears in front of me, turning and flicking. Branty's dark, bright eye under his red forelock. My mother's face. The little opal she wore on a silver chain. I saw and thought of each separate thing, each time with a sharp piercing pain, because all those little pangs, though they were endless, were still easier to bear than the single immense pain of realising that I must not see anything, that I must see nothing, that I must be blind.

We were both very tired, and I thought perhaps we'd go on saying nothing at least for one more night, that Canoc would put it off till morning (and what would morning mean, when I could not see the light above the hills?). But after our supper, eaten in weary silence, he said to my mother that we must talk, and we went up to her tower room, where a fire was laid. It had been a bright day but a cool one, the windy end of April, and the night was cold. The warmth of the fire was very pleasant on my legs and face. I will feel that when I can't see it, I thought.

My father and mother were speaking of the lost heifers. I gazed into the fire as it caught and flared, and the weary peacefulness that had taken hold of me for a minute slipped away. Little by little my heart filled up with an immense anger at the injustice of what had befallen me. I would not bear it, I would not endure it. I would not blind myself because my father feared me! The fire leapt up along a dry branch, crackling and sparking, and I caught my breath, turning towards them, towards him.

He sat in the wooden chair. My mother sat on the cross-legged stool she liked, beside him; her hand lay on his, on his knee. Their faces in the firelight were shadowed, tender, mysterious. My left hand was raised, pointing at him, trembling. I saw that, and I saw the ash tree on the hillside

above the brook writhe and its branches blacken, and I clapped both my hands up over my eyes, hard, pressing hard, so I could not see, so I could not see anything but the blurs of color in blackness that you see when you press hard on your eyes.

“What is it, Orrec?” My mother’s voice.

“Tell her, Father!”

Hesitantly, laboriously, he began to tell her what had happened. He did not tell it in order, or clearly, and I grew impatient with his clumsiness. “Say what happened to Hamneda, tell what happened by the Ashbrook!” I commanded, pressing my hands to my eyes, closing them tighter, as the awful anger swept through me again. Why couldn’t he just say it? He mixed it up and began again and seemed unable to come to the point, to say what it all led to. My mother barely spoke, trying to make sense of all this confusion and distress. “But this wild gift—?” she asked finally, and when Canoc hesitated again, I broke in: “What it means is, I have the power of unmaking but I haven’t any power over it. I can’t use it when I want to and then I do use it when I don’t want to. I could kill you both if I looked at you right now.”

There was a silence, and then she said, resisting, indignant, “But surely —”

“No,” my father said. “Orrec is telling the truth.”

“But you’ve trained him, taught him, for years, ever since he was a baby!”

Her protests only sharpened my pain and rage. “It wasn’t any use,” I said. “I’m like the dog. Hamneda. He couldn’t learn. He was useless. And dangerous. The best thing to do was kill him.”

“Orrec!”

“The power itself,” Canoc said, “not Orrec, but his power—his gift. He can’t use it, and it may use him. It’s dangerous, as he says. To him, to us, to everyone. In time he’ll learn to control it. It is a great gift, he’s young, in time . . . But for now, for now it has to be taken from him.”

“How?” Mother’s voice was a thread.

“A blindfold.”

“A blindfold!”

“The sealed eye has no power.”

“But a blindfold— You mean, when he’s outside the house— When he’s with other people—”

“No,” Canoc said, and I said, “No. All the time. Until I know I’m not going to hurt somebody or kill somebody without even knowing I’m doing it till it’s done, till they’re dead, till they’re lying there like a bag of meat. I won’t do that again. Ever again. Ever.” I sat there by the hearth with my hands pressed to my eyes, hunched up, sick, sick and dizzy in that blackness. “Seal my eyes now,” I said. “Do it now.”

If Melle protested and Canoc insisted further, I don’t remember. I only remember my own agony. And the relief at last, when my father came to me where I sat crouching there by the hearth, and gently took my hands down from my face, slipped a cloth over my eyes, and tied it at the back of my head. It was black, I saw it before he tied it on me, the last thing I saw: firelight, and a strip of black cloth in my father’s hands.

Then I had darkness.

And I felt the warmth of the unseen fire, as I had imagined I would.

My mother was crying, quietly, trying not to let me hear her cry; but the blind have keen ears. I had no desire to weep. I had shed enough tears. I was very tired. Their voices murmured. The fire crackled softly. Through the warm darkness I heard my mother say, “He’s falling asleep,” and I was.

My father must have carried me to my bed like a little child.

When I woke it was dark, and I sat up to see if there was any hint of dawn over the hills out my window, and could not see the window, and wondered if heavy clouds had come in and hidden the stars. Then I heard the birds singing for sunrise, and put my hands up to the blindfold.

IT’S A QUEER business, making oneself blind. I had asked Canoc what the will was, what it meant to will something. Now I learned what it meant.

To cheat, to look, one glance, only a glance—the temptations of course were endless. Every step, every act that was now so immensely difficult and complicated and awkward could become easy and natural so easily and naturally. Just lift the blindfold, just for a moment, just from one eye, just take one peek. . . .

I did not lift the blindfold, but it did slip several times, and my eyes would dazzle with all the brightness of the world's day before I could close them. We learned to lay soft patches over the eyelids before tying the cloth round my head; then it did not need to be tied so painfully tight. And I was safe from sight.

That is how I felt: safe. Learning to be blind was a queer business, yes, and a hard one, but I kept to it. The more impatient I was with the helplessness and dreariness of being sightless and the more I raged against the blindfold, the more I feared to lift it. It saved me from the horror of destroying what I did not mean to destroy. While I wore it, I could not kill what I loved. I remembered what my fear and anger had done. I remembered the moment when I thought I had destroyed my father. If I could not learn to use my power, I could learn how not to use it.

That was what I willed to do, because only so could my will act. Only in this bondage could I have any freedom.

On the first day of my blindness, I groped my way down to the entrance hall of the Stone House and felt along the wall till my hands found Blind Caddard's staff. I had not looked at it for years. My childish game of touching it because I wasn't supposed to touch it had been half my life ago. But I remembered where it was, and I knew I had a right to it now.

It was too tall for me and awkwardly heavy, but I liked the worn, silken feeling of the place where I grasped it, a little higher than I would naturally have reached. I stuck it out, swept it across the floor, knocked the end of it against the wall. It guided me back across the hall. After that I often carried it when I went outside. Inside the house I did better using my hands to feel my way. Outdoors, the staff gave me a certain reassurance. It was a weapon. If I was threatened, I could strike with it. Not strike with the hideous power of my gift, but a straight blow, simple retaliation and defense. Sightless, I felt forever vulnerable, knowing that anybody could make a fool of me or hurt me. The heavy stick in my hand made up for that, a little.

At first my mother was not the comfort to me she had always been. It was to my father that I turned for unwavering approval and support. Mother could not approve, could not believe that what I was doing was right and necessary. To her it was monstrous, the result of monstrous,

unnatural powers or beliefs. “You can take off the blindfold when you’re with me, Orrec,” she said.

“Mother, I can’t.”

“It is silly to be afraid, Orrec. It’s foolish. You’ll never hurt me. I know that. Wear it outside if you have to, but not in here with me. I want to see your eyes, my son!”

“Mother, I can’t.” That was all I could say. I had to say it again and again, for she cajoled and persuaded. She had not seen Hamneda’s death; she had never gone out along the Ashbrook to see that ghastly, blasted hillside. I thought of asking her to go there, but could not. I would not answer her arguments.

At last she spoke to me with real bitterness. “This is ignorant superstition, Orrec,” she said. “I am ashamed of you. I thought I had taught you better. Do you think a rag around your eyes will keep you from doing evil, if there’s evil in your heart? And if there’s good in your heart, how will you do good now? ‘Will you stop the wind with a wall of grasses, or the tide by telling it to stay?’ ” In her despair she returned to the liturgies of Bendraman that she had learned as a child in her father’s house.

And when I still held firm, she said, “Shall I burn the book I made you, then? It’s no use to you now. You don’t want it. You’ve closed your eyes—you’ve closed your mind.”

That made me cry out—“It’s not forever, Mother!” I did not like to speak or think of any term to my blindness, of a day when I might see again: I dared not imagine it, because I could not imagine what would allow it, and feared false hope. But her threat, and her pain, wrung it out of me.

“How long, then?”

“I don’t know. Until I learn—” But I didn’t know what to say. How was I to learn to use a gift I couldn’t use? Hadn’t I been trying to, all my life?

“You’ve learned all your father could teach you,” she said. “Learned it only too well.” She stood up then and left me without another word. I heard the soft swish as she threw her shawl over her shoulders, and her steps going out of the hall.

She was not of the unyielding temper that could hold such anger long. That night as we said goodnight I could hear in her voice her sweet rueful

smile as she whispered, “I won’t burn your book, dear son. Or your blindfold.” And from then on she did not plead and made no more protest, but took my blindness as a fact and helped me as she could.

The best way I found to be blind was to try to act as if I could see: not to creep and feel my way about, but to step out, knock my face against the wall if I met a wall, and fall if I fell. I learned my ways about the house and yards and kept to them, but used them freely, going outdoors as often as I could. I saddled and bridled good Roanie, who was patient with my fumbling as she had been patient with it when I was five, and mounted her and let her take me where she thought best. Once in the saddle and out of the echoes of the walls of the stable yard, there was nothing to guide me at all; I might be on the hillsides or the highlands or the moon for all I knew. But Roanie knew where we were, and also knew I was not the thoughtless, fearless rider I had been. She looked after me, and brought me home.

“I want to go to Roddmant,” I said, after my eyes had been sealed a halfmonth or longer. “I want to ask Gry to give me a dog.” I had to get up my determination to say that, for poor Hamneda and the horrible thing I had made of him were in my mind as if branded into it. But the thought of having a dog to aid my blindness had come to me the night before, and I knew it was a good one. And I longed to talk with Gry.

“A dog,” Canoc said with surprise, but Melle understood at once, and said, “That’s a good idea. I’ll ride—” I knew she had been about to say she would ride to Roddmant on my errand (though she was not much of a horsewoman, and timid even with Roanie), but what she said was, “I’ll ride with you, if you like.”

“Can we go tomorrow?”

“Put it off a little while,” Canoc said. “It’s time we were making ready to go to Drummant.”

In all that had befallen me, I had utterly forgotten about Brantor Ogge and his invitation. The reminder was most unwelcome. “I can’t go now!” I said.

“You can,” my father said.

“Why should he? Why should we?” my mother demanded.

“I’ve said what’s at stake.” Canoc’s voice was hard. “A chance of truce, if not of friendship. And the offer, maybe, of a betrothal.”

“But Drum won’t want to betroth his granddaughter to Orrec now!”

“Will he not? When he knows Orrec can kill at a glance? That his gift is so strong he must seal his eyes to spare his enemies? Oh, he’ll be glad to ask and glad to get what we choose to give! Don’t you see that?”

I had never heard that tone of harsh, fierce triumph in my father’s voice. It shook me strangely. It woke me.

For the first time I realised that my blindfold made me not only vulnerable, but threatening. My power was so great that it could not be released, must be restrained. If I unsealed my eyes . . . I myself was, like Caddard’s staff, a weapon.

And I also understood in that moment why so many of the people of the house and the domain treated me as they had done since my eyes were sealed, speaking to me with an uneasy respect instead of the old easy fellowship, falling silent as I came near, creeping past me as if they hoped I couldn’t hear them. I thought they shunned and despised me because I was blind. It hadn’t occurred to me that they feared me because they knew why I was blind.

Indeed, as I was to learn, the tale had grown in the telling, and I had the grisly credit of all kinds of feats. I had destroyed a whole pack of wild dogs, bursting them open like bladders. I had cleared the venomous snakes out of all Caspromant merely by sweeping my eyes over the hills. I had glanced at old Ubbro’s cottage, and that same night the old man had fallen paralysed and lost the power of speech, and it was not a punishment but only the wild gift striking without reason. When I had gone looking for the missing white heifers, the instant I saw them, I had destroyed them, against my own will. And so in fear of this random and terrible power I had blinded myself—or Canoc had blinded me—though others said no, only sealed his eyes with a blindfold. If anybody disbelieved these tales, they took him to see the ruined hillside above the Ashbrook, the dead tree, the little broken bones of voles and moles and mice on the waste ground there, the burst boulders and shattered stones.

I didn’t know these stories then, but it had dawned on me that I had a new power, which lay not in acts but words—in reputation.

“We’ll go to Drummant,” my father said. “It’s time. Day after tomorrow. If we set off early we can be there by nightfall. Take your red gown, Melle. I want Drum to see the gift he gave me.”

“Oh, dear,” my mother said. “How long must we stay?”

“Five or six days, I suppose.”

“Oh, dear, dear. What can I take the brantor’s wife? I must have some guest-present for her.”

“It’s not necessary.”

“It is,” said my mother.

“Well, a basket of something from the kitchen?”

“Pah,” said my mother. “There’s nothing this time of year.”

“A basket of chicks,” I suggested. Mother had taken me into the poultry yard that morning to let me handle a brood of newly hatched chicks, putting them into my hands, cheeping, warm, weightless, downy, prickly.

“That’s it,” she said.

And when we set off two days later early in the morning, she had a basket full of cheeping on her saddlebow. I wore my new kilt and coat, my man’s coat.

Because I must ride Roanie, she was on Greylag, who was a completely trusty horse, though his height and size scared her. My father rode the colt. He had given much of Branty’s training to me and Alloc, but when you saw him ride Branty, you saw that he and the colt were made for each other, handsome, nervous, proud, and rash. I wished I could see him, that morning. I longed to see him. But I sat good Roanie and let her carry me forward into the dark.

Chapter 10

IT WAS strange and wearisome to ride all day seeing nothing of the country we rode through, aware only of the sound of hoofs on soft or stony ground, the creak of saddles, the smell of horse sweat and broom flower, the touch of the wind, guessing what the road must be like by Roanie's gait. Unable to be ready for a change, a stumble, a sway, a check, I was always tense in the saddle, and often had to abandon shame and hold the pommel to keep myself steady. Mostly we had to ride single file, so there was no conversation. We paused now and then so Mother could give the chicks water, and we stopped at midday to rest and water the horses and to eat our lunch. The chicks chirped and cheeped vigorously over the feed Mother scattered in their basket. I asked where we were. Under Black Crag, Father said, in the domain of the Cordes. I could not imagine the place, never having been so far to the west of Caspromant. We soon went on, and to me the afternoon was a dull, long, black dream.

"By the Stone!" my father said. He never swore, not even such a mild old-fashioned oath as that, and it startled me out of my trance. My mother was riding in front, for there was no mistaking the path, and my father behind, keeping an eye on us. She had not heard him speak, but I asked, "What is it?"

"Our heifers," he said, "over there." And remembering I could not see where he pointed, "There's a herd of cattle in the meadows under the hill there, and two of them are white. The rest are duns and roans." He was silent a moment, probably straining his eyes to see. "They have the hump, and the shallow horns," he said. "It's them all right."

We had all stopped, and Mother asked, "Are we still in Cordemant?"

"Drummant," my father said. "For the past hour. But those are the Rodd breed. And my cows, I think. If I got closer to them, I could be sure of it."

“Not now, Canoc,” she said. “It’ll be getting dark before long. We ought to go on.” There was strong apprehension in her voice. He heeded it.

“Right you are,” he said, and I heard Greylag step forward, and Roanie followed him without my needing to signal her, and the colt’s light step followed us.

We came to the Stone House of Drummant, and that was hard for me, that arrival in a strange place among strangers. My mother took my arm as soon as I dismounted and hung on to me, maybe to reassure herself as well as me. Among the many voices, I heard Ogge Drum’s, loud and genial. “Well, well, well, so you did come at last! And welcome to you! Welcome to Drummant! We’re poor folk here but what we have we share! What’s this, what’s this, the boy bandaged up like this? What’s the trouble then, lad? Weak eyes, is it?”

“Ah, we could wish it were that,” Canoc said lightly. He was a fencer; but Ogge was no swordsman, he used a bludgeon. A bully doesn’t answer you; he may hear but pays no heed; he talks on as if you were of no account, and it gives him the advantage always at the start, though not always in the end.

“Well, what a shame, to be led about like a baby, but no doubt he’ll grow out of it. Come this way, come this way. See to their horses, there! Barro, fetch the maids to call my lady!” and so on, a shouting of orders and commands, a great commotion, much coming and going, many voices. There were people all round me, crowds of unseen, unknown people. My mother was explaining to someone about the basket of chicks for the brantor’s wife. She kept hold of my arm as I was dragged over thresholds and up stairs. My head was whirling by the time we stopped. We were brought basins of water, and people buzzed all around us as we hurriedly washed off our travel dirt and brushed our clothes and Mother changed her dress.

Then it was down stairs again, and we came into a room which, by the sound of the echoes, was a great, tall one. There was a hearth: I could hear the crackle of the fire and feel a bit of warmth on my legs and face. Mother kept her hand on my shoulder. “Orrec,” she said, “here is the brantor’s wife, the lady Denno,” and I bowed in the direction of the hoarse, tired-sounding voice that bade me be welcome to Drummant. There followed other introductions—the brantor’s elder son Harba and his wife,

his younger son Sebb and his wife, his daughter and her husband, the grown children of some of these, and other people of the household—all names without faces, voices in the dark. My mother's shy, gracious voice was drowned out by these loud talkers, and I couldn't help but hear how different from them she sounded, how foreign in her Lowland courtesies, even in her pronunciation of some words.

My father was close to me too, right behind me. He didn't talk on at length the way the Drum men did, but made prompt, affable responses, laughed at their jokes, and spoke to several of the men there with what sounded like the pleasure of renewing a friendship. One of these men, a Barre, I think, said, "So the lad's got the wild eye, has he?" and Canoc said, "He does," and the other man said, "Well, never fear, he'll grow into his power," and began a story about a boy of Olmmant whose gift was wild till he was twenty. I tried hard to hear the story, but the clamor of voices kept drowning it out.

After a while we went to table, and that was a terrible strain, for it takes a long time to learn to eat in a decent fashion if you cannot see, and I had not got the skill yet. I was afraid to touch anything for fear of spilling it or soiling myself. They had tried to seat me away from my mother, and Brantor Ogge called for her to join the men at the head of the table, but she gently and immovably insisted on sitting next to me. She helped me to a chop I could pick up in my fingers and gnaw without shocking anybody's sensibilities. Not that they went in much for fine manners at Drummant, to judge by the noises of chewing and gulping and belching all round me.

My father was seated farther up the table, near or next to Ogge, and as the noise of talk slackened a bit, I heard his quiet voice, unmistakable, though there was a tone to it, a kind of lilt I'd never heard before: "I want to thank you, Brantor, for looking after my heifers. I've been cursing myself for a fool all month for not keeping my fences mended. They jumped them, of course. They're light-footed, those Rodd cattle. I'd all but given that pair up. Thought they'd be down in Dunet by now! And so they would be if your people hadn't kept them safe for me." By this time nobody at that end of the table was saying a word, though at our end some of the women were still chattering. "I counted a good deal on those heifers," Canoc went on in the same open, confident, almost confiding way. "I have it in mind to build up a herd such as Blind Caddard had. So

my hearty thanks to you, and the first calf one of them drops, bull or heifer as you please, is yours. You have only to send for it, Brantor Ogge."

There was just the one beat of silence, and then somebody near Canoc said, "Well said, well said!" and other voices joined in, but I did not hear Ogge speak.

The dinner was over at last, and my mother asked to be shown to her room, taking me with her. I heard Ogge then: "Oh, you'll not take young Orrec off already? He's not such a child as that, is he? Sit up with the men, boy, and taste my spring brewing!" But Melle pleaded that I was tired from the long day's ride, and the brantor's wife Denno said in her hoarse, tired voice, "Let the boy be for tonight, Ogge," and so we escaped, though my father had to stay and drink with the men.

It was late, I think, when he came up to the bedroom; I had been asleep, but I roused up when he knocked over a stool and made some other clatter.

"You're drunk!" Melle whispered, and he said, louder than he meant to, "Horse-piss beer!" She laughed, and he snorted.

"Where's the cursed bed!" he said, thumping about the room. They settled down. I lay on the cot under the window and listened to their whispering.

"Canoc, weren't you taking an awful risk?"

"Coming here at all was the risk."

"But about the heifers—"

"What's to gain by silence?"

"But you challenged him."

"To lie about it in front of his own people, who all know how the heifers got here—or to take the out I offered him."

"Hush, hush," she murmured, for his voice had got louder again. "Well, I'm glad he took the out."

"If he did. That's yet to see. Where's the girl? Did you see her yet?"

"What girl?"

"The bride. The blushing bride."

"Canoc, be quiet!" She was half scolding, half laughing.

"Shut my mouth then, love, shut my mouth for me," he whispered, and she laughed, and I heard the creak of the bed boards. They talked no more, and I slipped back into the luxury of sleep.

♦

THE NEXT DAY Brantor Ogge sent for my mother to join him as he showed my father about his establishment, the buildings and barns and stables, and I had to come along. No other women were with us, only his sons and some of the men of Drummant. Ogge talked to my mother in a strange, artificial way, patronising yet with a wheedling note. He spoke of her to the other men as if she were a pretty animal, talking about her ankles, her hair, the way she walked. When he talked to her, he often mentioned her Lowland origin with half-joking contempt. He seemed to be trying to remind her or himself that she was inferior to him. Yet he stuck to her side like a great leech. I tried to be between her and him, but he always got next to her on the other side of her as we walked about. Several times he suggested, all but ordered her, to send me off with "the other children" or with my father. She never refused to do so, but answered lightly, with a smile in her voice, and somehow did not do so.

As we returned to the Stone House, Ogge told us that he was planning a boar hunt up in the hills north of Drummant. They had been waiting, he said, for Parn, Gry's mother, to come before they set off. He pressed us to come on the hunt. My mother demurred, and he said, "Well, women don't belong on a pig hunt after all. Dangerous business. But send the boy along, it'll give him a change from moping about in his blindfold, eh? And if the boar charges, he can flick an eye at him and goodbye pig, eh? Eh, lad? Always a good thing to have a quick eye along on a pig hunt."

"It'll have to be mine, then," my father said, in the unfailingly pleasant tone he had here at Drummant. "A bit too much risk, yet, with Orrec."

"Risk? Risk? Afraid of the pig, is he?"

"Oh, not the risk for him," said Canoc. The tip of his fencing sword just touched Ogge that time.

Ogge had dropped his pretense of not knowing why my eyes were sealed, since it was clear that everybody else at Drummant knew why, and indeed believed all the wilder versions of my exploits. I was the boy with the destroying eye, the gift so powerful I couldn't control it, the new Blind Caddard. Ogge struck out with his bludgeon, but his blows fell short; my reputation put us just out of his reach. But he had other weapons.

Among all the people we had met the night before and all the people round us this morning, we had not yet been introduced to the brantor's granddaughter, the daughter of his younger son Sebb Drum and Daredan Caspro. We had met the parents: Sebb had a jovial, booming voice like his father; Daredan had spoken to my mother and me kindly enough, in a weak voice that made me picture her as decrepit, though, as Canoc had said, she wasn't all that ancient, after all. When we went back into the house later in the morning, Daredan was there, but still the daughter had not been brought forth, the girl who was, perhaps, to be my betrothed. The bride, the blushing bride, Canoc had called her last night, and at the thought I blushed.

As if he had the Morga gift of knowing what was in your mind, Ogge said in his loud voice, "You'll have to wait a few days to meet my granddaughter Vardan, young Caspro. She's down at the old Rimm house with her cousins. What's the use of meeting a girl you can't see, I was going to say, but then of course there's other ways to get to know a girl, as you'll find out, eh? Even more enjoyable ways, eh?" The men round us laughed. "She'll be here when we're back from pigsticking."

Parn Barre arrived that afternoon, and then all the talk was of the hunt. I had to go along. My mother wanted to forbid me to go, but I knew there was no way out of it, and said, "Don't worry, Mother. I'll be on Roanie, and it'll be all right."

"I'll be with him," Canoc said. I knew my prompt stoicism had pleased him deeply.

We left before dawn the next morning. Canoc stayed right beside me, on horseback and afoot. His presence was my only rock in an endless confusion, a black meaningless wilderness of riding and stopping and shouting and coming and going. It went on and on. We were gone five days. I could never get my bearings; I never knew what lay before my face or feet. Never was the temptation stronger to lift my blindfold, and yet never had I feared so much to do so, for I was in a continuous, terrified rage—helpless, resentful, humiliated. I dreaded and could not escape Brantor Ogge's shouting, harrying voice. Sometimes he pretended to believe I was truly blind and pitied me loudly, but mostly he teased and dared me, never quite openly, to lift my blindfold and display my destroying power. He feared me, and resented his fear, and wanted to make

me suffer for it; and he was curious, because my power was unknown. He never overstepped certain lines with Canoc, for he understood clearly what Canoc could do. But what could I do? Might my blindfold be a trick, a bluff? Ogge was like a child teasing a chained dog to see if it really would bite. I was in his chains and at his mercy. I hated him so much that I felt that if I saw him, nothing could stop me, I would, I must destroy him, like the rat, like the adder, like the hound. . . .

Parn Barre called a herd of wild swine down out of the foothills of Mount Airn, and called the boar away from the sows. When the dogs and hunters had the beast encircled, she left the hunt and came back to the camp, where I had been left along with the packhorses and the servants.

It had been a shameful moment for me when they all set off. “You’re bringing the boy along, aren’t you, Caspro?” Brantor Ogge said, and my father replied as pleasantly as ever that neither I nor old Roanie was coming, for fear of holding others back. “So then you’ll be staying safe with him too?” came the big braying voice, and Canoc’s soft one: “No, I thought I’d come to the kill.”

He touched my shoulder before he mounted—he had brought Greylag, not the colt—and whispered, “Hold fast, my son.” So I held fast, sitting alone among Drum’s serfs and servants, who kept clear of me and soon forgot I was there, talking and joking loudly with one another. I had no idea of what was around me except the roll of bedding I had slept in the night before, which lay near my left hand. The rest of the universe was unknown, a blank gulf in which I would be lost the instant I stood up and took a step or two. I found some little stones in the dirt under my hand and played with them, handling them, counting them, trying to pile them or put them in lines, to pass the dreary time. We scarcely know how much of our pleasure and interest in life comes to us through our eyes until we have to do without them; and part of that pleasure is that the eyes can choose where to look. But the ears can’t choose where to listen. I wanted to hear the birds singing, for the forest was full of their spring music, but mostly I heard only the men yelling and guffawing, and could only think what a noisy race we humans are.

I heard a single horse coming into camp, and the men’s voices became less boisterous. Presently someone spoke near me: “Orrec, I’m Parn,” she said. I felt her kindness in saying who she was, though I knew her voice,

which was much like Gry's. "I've got a bit of fruit here. Open your hand." And she put two or three dried plums in my hand. I thanked her and chewed away on them. She had sat down near me and I could hear her chewing too.

"Well," she said, "by now the boar's killed a dog or two, and one or two men, maybe, but probably not, and they've killed him. And they're gutting him and cutting poles to carry him, and the dogs are after the guts, and the horses want to get away from it all but they can't." She spat. Maybe a plum pit.

"Do you never stay for the kill?" I asked timidly. Though I had known her all my life, Parn always daunted me.

"Not with boar and bear. They'd want me to interfere, hold the beast so they could kill it. Give them an unfair advantage."

"But with deer, or hares—?"

"They're prey. A quick kill's best. Boar and bear aren't prey. They deserve their fair fight."

It was a clear position, with its own justice; I accepted it.

"Gry's got a dog for you," Parn said.

"I was going to ask her . . ."

"As soon as she heard about your eyes being sealed, she said you'd want a guide dog. She's been working with one of our shepherd Kinny's pups. They're good dogs. Come by Roddmant on your way home. Gry might have her ready for you."

That was a good moment, the only good moment of those endless, wretched days.

The hunters came back late to camp, straggling in. I was anxious about my father, of course, but dared not ask and only listened for what other men said, and for his voice. He came at last, leading Greylag, who had hurt his leg a little in some kind of collision or melee. He greeted me gently, but I could tell he was exasperated almost beyond endurance. The hunt had been mismanaged, Ogge and his elder son quarreling about tactics and confusing everyone, so that the boar, though brought to bay, had killed two dogs and escaped, a horse had broken its leg in the chase, then as the boar had got into thickets, the hunt had to dismount and go in afoot, and another dog had been disemboweled, and finally, as Canoc put it, very low-voiced,

to me and Parn, “they all stuck and stabbed at the poor brute but none of them dared get close to it. It took half an hour to kill it.”

We sat in silence, hearing Ogge and his son shouting at each other. The hunt servants finally brought the boar into camp; I smelled the rank wild stench of it and the metallic smell of blood. The liver was ceremonially divided up to be toasted over the fire by those who had been in at the kill. Canoc did not go to get his share. He went to look after our horses. I heard Ogge’s son Harba shouting at him to come get his killfeast, but I did not hear Ogge call to him, nor did Ogge come to harass me as his custom was. That night, and all the time it took us to return to the Stone House of Drummant, Ogge did not say a word to Canoc or to me. It was a relief to be spared his jovial bullying, but it worried me too. I asked my father, when we camped the last night, if the brantor was angry with him.

“He says I refused to save his dogs,” Canoc said. We lay by the warm ashes of a fire, head to head, whispering. I knew it was dark, and could pretend that it was because it was dark that I couldn’t see.

“What happened?”

“The boar was slashing the dogs open. He yelled to me, ‘Use your eye, Caspro!’ As if I’d use my gift on a hunt! I went at the boar with my spear, along with Harba and a couple of others. Ogge didn’t come in with us. The boar broke then, and ran right past Ogge, and got away. Ach, it was a botch, a butchery. And he lays it on me.”

“Do we have to stay, when we get back there?”

“A night or so, yes.”

“He hates us,” I said.

“Not your mother.”

“Her most,” I said.

Canoc did not understand me, or did not believe me. But I knew it was true. Ogge could bully me all he liked, he could prove his superiority to Canoc in wealth and strength and so on, but Melle Aulitta was out of his reach. I had seen how he looked at her when he came to our house. I knew he looked at her here with that same amazement and hate and greed. I knew how he pressed close to her; I had heard his impotent attempts to impress her, boasting and patronising, and her mild, smiling replies, to which he had no reply. Nothing he had, or did, or was, could touch her. She did not even really fear him.

Chapter 11

WHEN WE got back from the days and nights in the wilderness, and I could rejoin my mother, and bathe, and put on a clean shirt, even the unfriendly rooms of Drummant, which I had never seen, seemed familiar.

We went down to dinner in the great hall, and there I heard Brantor Ogge speak to my father for the first time in two days. “Where’s your wife, Caspro?” he was saying. “Where’s the pretty calluc? And your blind boy? Here’s my granddaughter come to meet him, come across the whole domain, clear from Rimmant. Here, boy, come meet Vardan, let’s see what you make of each other!” There was a brassy, crowing laughter in his voice.

I heard Daredan Caspro, the girl’s mother, murmur to her to come forward. My mother, her hand on my arm, said, “We’re happy to meet you, Vardan. This is my son Orrec.”

I did not hear the girl say anything, but I heard a kind of sniggering or whimpering noise, so that I wondered if she was carrying a puppy that was making that sound.

“How do you do,” I said, with a bob of the head.

“Do you do you do you,” someone said in front of me, a thick, weak voice, where the girl must be.

“Say how do you do, Vardan.” That was Daredan’s tremulous whisper.

“Do you do, do you do.”

I was speechless. My mother said, “Very well, thank you, my dear. It’s a long way from Rimmant, isn’t it. You must be quite tired.”

The whimpering, puppyish sound began again.

“Yes, she is,” her mother began, but Ogge’s big voice, right next to us, broke in, “Well, well, let the young people talk to each other, don’t be putting words in their mouths, you women! No matchmaking! Though they’re a fine pair, aren’t they? What do you say, boy, is she pretty, my

granddaughter? She’s got the same blood as you, you know, not calluc blood, but Caspro blood. True lineage will out, they always say! Is she pretty, eh?”

“I can’t see her, sir. I imagine she is.”

Mother squeezed my arm, I don’t know whether in terror at my boldness or encouraging my effort to be civil.

“Can’t see her! I can’t see her sir!” Ogge mimicked. “Well, let her lead you about then. She can see. She has fine eyes. Fine, sharp, keen, Caspro eyes. Don’t you, girl? Don’t you?”

“Do you do. Don’t you. Don’t you. Mama, can I want to stairs.”

“Yes, dear. We will. It was a long ride, she’s quite tired, please forgive us, Father-in-Law, we’ll have a little rest before dinner.”

The girl and her mother escaped. We could not. We had to sit for hours at the long table. The boar had been roasting all day on the spit. There were shouts of triumph as the head was carried in. Toasts were drunk to the hunters. The strong reek of boar’s flesh filled the hall. Slabs of it were piled on my plate. Wine was poured, not beer or ale, but red wine from the vineyards in the southwest of the domain; only Drummant in all the Uplands made wine. It was heavy and sweet-sour. Ogge was soon louder-voiced than ever, shouting down his elder son and making much of the younger, Vardan’s father. “So, how about a betrothal party, Sebb?” he would bellow, and laugh, not waiting for any answer, and then again after half an hour, “So, how about a betrothal party? Hey, Sebb? All our friends here. All under our roof. Caspros, Barres, Cordes, and Drums. The best blood of all the Uplands. Hey, Brantor Canoc Caspro, what do you say? Will you come? Here’s a toast. Here’s to friendship, loyalty, love, and marriage!”

Mother and I were not allowed to go upstairs after dinner. We had to stay in the great hall while Ogge Drum and his people drank themselves drunk. He was always near us, and talked a great deal to my mother. His tone and words grew more and more offensive, but neither Melle nor Canoc, who kept as close to us as he could, could be provoked to answer angrily, or to answer much at all. And after a time the brantor’s wife intervened, staying with us as a kind of shield to my mother, answering Ogge for her. He grew sullen then and went off to quarrel again with his elder son, and we at last were able to slip out of the room and upstairs.

“Canoc, can we leave—go? Now?” my mother said in a whisper, in the long stone passage that led to our room.

“Wait,” he answered. We got to our room and shut the door. “I need to talk to Parn Barre. We’ll go early. He won’t do us any harm tonight.”

She gave a kind of laugh of despair.

“I’ll be with you,” he said. She let go of my arm to hold him and be held.

That was all as it should be, and I was very glad to hear we were going to escape, but I had a question that needed an answer.

“The girl,” I said. “Vardan.”

I felt them look at me, and there was a little silence while no doubt their eyes met.

“She’s small, and not ugly,” my mother said. “She has a sweet smile. But she’s . . .”

“An idiot,” my father said.

“No, Canoc, not that bad— But . . . not right. She’s like a child, I think, in her mind. A little child. I don’t think she’ll ever be anything more.”

“An idiot,” my father repeated. “This is what Drum offered us as a wife for you, Orrec.”

“Canoc,” my mother murmured, scared, as I was, by the fiery hatred in his voice.

There was a knocking at our door. My father went to answer it. There were low-voiced consultations. After some while he came back, without my mother, to where I was sitting on the edge of my cot. “The child’s been taken with seizures,” he said, “and Daredan’s asked for your mother to help her. Melle made fast friends with most of the women here, while we were out pig hunting and making enemies.” He gave a humorless, weary laugh. I could hear him sit down, letting himself down all at once like a tired hound, in the chair before the unlit hearth. “I wish we were out of here, Orrec!”

“So do I,” I said.

“Lie down and sleep. I’ll wait for your mother.”

I wanted to wait for her too, and tried to sit up with him; but he came and pushed me over gently onto the cot and covered me with the fine, warm woollen blanket, and I was asleep the next moment.

I woke suddenly and was wide awake. A cock was crowing away down in the barnyards. It might be dawn, or long before dawn. There was some small noise in the room, and I said, “Father?”

“Orrec? Are you awake? It’s dark, I can’t see.” My mother felt her way to my cot and sat down beside me. “Oh, I’m so cold!” she said. She was shivering violently. I tried to put the warm blanket up around her shoulders, and she pulled it around us both.

“Where’s Father?”

“He said he had to talk to Parn Barre. He says we’ll leave as soon as there’s light to see by. I told Denno and Daredan we were leaving. They understand. I just said we had been away too long and Canoc was worried about the spring plowing.”

“What was wrong with the girl?”

“She gets overtired easily and has spasms, and her mother is frightened by it, poor thing. I sent her off to get some sleep, she doesn’t get much, and sat with the little girl. And then I half fell asleep there, and I don’t know . . . It seemed . . . I got so cold, I can’t seem to get warm . . .” I hugged her, and she snuggled up next to me. “Finally some of the other women came and could stay with the child, and I came back here, and your father went to find Parn. I suppose I should get our things ready to go. But it’s so dark still. I keep looking for the dawn.”

“Stay and get warm,” I said, and we sat there trying to warm each other until my father came back. He had his flint and steel and could light a candle, and my mother hurried our few things together into the saddlebag. We stole through the halls and passages and down the stairs and out of the house. I could smell dawn in the air, and the cocks were crowing as if they meant it. We went to the stables, where a sleepy, surly fellow roused up and helped us saddle our horses. My mother led Roanie out and held her while I mounted. I sat in the saddle waiting.

I heard my mother make a little surprised, grieving noise. Hoofs clopped on the cobbles as another of the horses was led out. She said, “Canoc, look.”

“Ach,” he said in disgust.

“What is it?” I asked.

“The chicks,” my father said, low-voiced. “His people set the basket down where your mother gave it to them. Left it. Left the birds to die.”

He helped Melle mount Greylag, and then rode Branty out of the stable; the stable boy opened the courtyard gate for us, and we rode out.

"I wish we could gallop," I said. My mother in her anxiety thought I meant it and said, "We can't, dear," but Canoc, riding close behind me, gave a short laugh. "No," he said, "we'll run away at a walk."

The birds were all singing now from tree to tree, and I kept thinking, as my mother had, that I would soon see the light of dawn.

After we had ridden several miles, she said, "It was a stupid gift to bring to a house like that."

"Like that?" said my father. "So grand and great, you mean?"

"In their own eyes," said Melle Aulitta.

I said, "Father, will they say we ran away?"

"Yes."

"Then we shouldn't—should we?"

"If we stayed, Orrec, I'd kill him. And though I'd like to kill him in his own house, I can't pay the price of that pleasure. He knows it. But I will get a little of my own back."

I didn't know what he meant, nor did my mother, till in the middle of the morning we heard a horse coming up behind us. We were alarmed, but Canoc said, "It's Parn."

She drew up with us and greeted us in her husky voice that was like Gry's. "So, where are your cattle, Canoc?" she said.

"Under that hill, ahead there." And we jogged on. Then we stopped, and my mother and I dismounted. She led me to a grassy place by a stream where I could sit. She took Greylag and Roanie into the water to drink and cool their feet; but Canoc and Parn rode off, and soon I could not hear them at all. "Where are they going?" I asked.

"Into that meadow. He must have asked Parn to call the heifers."

And after what seemed a long time, during which I listened nervously for the sound of pursuit and vengeance coming down the road and heard nothing but birdsong and the distant lowing of cattle, Mother said, "They're coming," and soon I heard the grass swishing at the legs of the animals, and Branty's greeting whuff to our horses, and my father's voice saying something with a laugh to Parn.

"Canoc," my mother said, and he replied at once, "It's all right, Melle. They're ours. Drum looked after them for us, and now I'm taking them

home. It’s all right.”

“Very well,” she said unhappily.

And soon we all went on together, she first, then I, then Parn with the two heifers following close behind her, and Canoc bringing up the rear. The cattle did not slow us down; young and lively, and of a hauling, plowing breed, they stepped right out with the horses and kept up a good pace all day. We came onto our own domain by mid-afternoon, and cut across the northern part of it, heading for Roddmant. It had been Parn’s suggestion that we take the heifers there and leave them in the Rodd pastures for a while with their old herd. “A little less provocative,” she said, “and a good deal harder for Drum to steal back.”

“Unless he comes calling on you,” Canoc said.

“That’s as may be. I’ll have no more to do with Ogge Drum in any way, except that if he wants a feud he’ll have one.”

“If he has it with you he has it with us,” Canoc said, joyfully fierce.

I heard my mother whisper, “Ennu, hear and be here.” That was always her prayer when she was worried or frightened. I had asked and she had told me long ago about Ennu, who smoothed the road, blessed the work, and mended quarrels. The cat was Ennu’s creature, and the opal Melle always wore was her stone.

About the time I ceased to feel the western sun on my back, we came to the Stone House of Roddmant. I had heard barking for a mile before we got there. A sea of dogs came round our horses as we rode in, all welcoming us joyously. And Ternoc came out shouting welcome to us too, and in a moment somebody came and took hold of my leg as I sat on Roanie. It was Gry, pressing her face against my leg.

“Here then, Gry, let him get off his horse,” Parn said in her dry voice. “Give him a hand.”

“I don’t need it,” I said. I dismounted creditably, and found Gry holding my arm now instead of my leg, and pressing her face against it, and crying. “Oh, Orrec,” she said. “Oh, Orrec!”

“It’s all right, Gry, it’s all right, really. It isn’t—I’m not—”

“I know,” she said, letting me go, and snuffling several times. “Hello, Mother. Hello, Brantor Canoc. Hello,” and I could hear her and Melle having a hug and kiss. Then she was back beside me.

“Parn says you have a dog,” I said, awkwardly enough, for the guilt of poor Hamneda’s death weighed on me—not only his death, but even the choice of him, the choice that Gry had known to be wrong.

“Do you want to see her?”

“Yes.”

“Come on.”

She took me somewhere—even this house and grounds, that I knew almost as well as my own house, were a labyrinth and a mystery in my blindness—and said, “Wait,” and after a minute or two said, “Coaly, sit. This is Coaly, Orrec. This is Orrec, Coaly.”

I squatted down. Reaching out a little, I felt warm breath on my hand, and then the delicate touch of whiskers, and a polite wet tongue washing my hand. I felt forward cautiously, afraid of poking the dog’s eye or making some wrong movement, but she sat still and I felt the silky, tightly curled hair of her head and neck, her high-held, soft, flopover ears. “She’s a black herder?” I said in a whisper.

“Yes. Kinny’s bitch had three pups last spring. This was the best one. The children made her a pet, and he’d started her as a sheepdog. I asked for her when I heard about your eyes. Here’s her lead,” Gry put a short, stiff leather leash in my hand. “Walk with her,” she said.

I stood up, and felt the dog stand. I took one step, and found the dog right in front of my legs, immovable. I laughed, though I was embarrassed. “We won’t get far this way!”

“It’s because if you went that way you’d fall over the lumber Fanno left there. Let her show you.”

“What do I do?”

“Say, ‘Walk on’ and her name.”

“Walk on, Coaly,” I said to the darkness at the end of the leather strap in my hand.

The strap tugged me gently to the right, then forward. I walked as boldly as I could, until the strap pulled me gently to stop.

“Back to Gry, Coaly,” I said, turning.

The strap turned me a little farther round and then walked me back and stopped me.

“I’m here,” said Gry right in front of me. Her voice was hoarse and abrupt.

I knelt, felt for the dog sitting on her haunches, and put my arm around her. A silky ear was against my face, the whiskers tickled my nose. “Coaly, Coaly,” I said.

“I didn’t use the calling with her, only at the very beginning, a couple of times,” Gry said. From the location of her voice she was squatting down near me. “She learned as fast as if I had. She’s bright. And steady. But you both need to work together.”

“Should I leave her here then, and come back?”

“I don’t think so. I can tell you some things not to do. And try not to ask too many things of her at once for a while. But I can come over and work with her with you. I’d like to do that.”

“That would be good,” I said. After the threats and passions and cruelties of Drummant, Gry’s clear love and kindness, and the calm, trusting, trustworthy response of the dog, were too much for me. I hid my face in the curly, silky fur. “Good dog,” I said.

Chapter 12

WHEN GRY and I went indoors at last, I was frightened to learn that my mother, dismounting, had fainted in my father's arms. They had taken her upstairs and put her to bed. Gry and I hung around feeling childish, useless, the way young people do when an adult is taken sick. Canoc came down at last. He came straight to me and said, "She'll be all right."

"Is she just tired?"

He hesitated, and Gry asked, "She didn't lose the baby?"

It was part of Gry's gift to know when there were two lives in one body. It was not part of ours. I am sure Canoc had not known Melle was with child before this day; she may not have known it herself.

To me the news carried little meaning. A boy of thirteen is at a great remove from that portion of life; pregnancy and childbirth are abstract matters, nothing to do with him at all.

"No," Canoc said. He hesitated again and said, "She needs to rest."

His tired, toneless voice troubled me. I wanted him to cheer up. I was sick of fear and gloom. We were out of all that, free again, with our friends, safe at Roddmant. "If she's all right for a while, maybe you could come see Coaly," I said.

"Later," he said. He touched my shoulder and went off. Gry took me round to the kitchen, for in the commotion nothing had been done about supper, and I was ravenous. The cook stuffed us with rabbit pie. Gry said I was a disgusting sight with gravy all over my face, and I said let her try eating what she couldn't see, and she said she had tried it—she had blindfolded herself for a full day, to find what it was like for me. When we had eaten we went back outdoors, and Coaly took me for a walk in the dark. There was a half moon that gave Gry some light to see her way by, but she said Coaly and I were getting on better than she was, and fell over a root to prove it.

When we were children together at Roddmant, Gry and I used to sleep wherever we fell asleep, like any young animals; but since then there had been talk of betrothals and such matters. We said goodnight like adults. Ternoc took me to my parents' room. Roddmant had no such array of bedrooms and beds as Drummant. Ternoc whispered to me that my mother was asleep in the bed, my father in the chair; he gave me a blanket, and I rolled myself up on the floor and slept there.

In the morning my mother insisted she was quite well. She had taken a little chill, nothing more. She was ready to go home. "Not on horseback," Canoc said, and Parn seconded him. Ternoc offered us a hay cart and the daughter of the droop-lipped mare that had borne him into battle at Dunet. So Mother and Coaly and I traveled to Caspromant in luxury, on rugs spread on straw in the cart, while Canoc rode Branty, and Greylag and Roanie followed willingly behind, all of us glad to be going home.

Coaly seemed to accept her change of house and owner with a tranquil heart, though she had to do an immense amount of sniffing around the house, and pissed her mark on various bushes and stones outside it. She politely greeted the few old hounds we had, but kept aloof from them. Her sheep-herding breed wasn't sociable and democratic as they were, but reserved and intent. She was like my father: she took her responsibilities seriously. I was her chief responsibility.

Gry soon rode over to continue our training, and came every few days. She rode a colt called Blaze, who belonged to the Barres of Cordemant. They had asked Parn to break him, and Parn was training both the colt and her daughter in horsebreaking. Callers use that word, though it has little to do with how they train a young horse. Nothing is broken in that education; rather something is made one, made whole. It's a long process. Gry explained it to me thus: we ask a horse to do things which the horse would by nature rather not do; and a horse doesn't submit its will to ours the way a dog does, being a herd animal not a pack animal, and preferring consensus to hierarchy. The dog accepts; the horse agrees. All this Gry and I discussed at length, while Coaly and I went about learning our duties to each other. And we talked about it when we went riding, Gry and Blaze learning and teaching their duties to each other, and I on Roanie, who had long since learned all she needed to know. Coaly came along with us, off

her leash, on holiday, free to trot, stop, sniff, take side trails, and start rabbits without worrying about me. But if I said her name, she was there.

Coaly and Gry made such a difference to my life that I remember that summer, the first I spent in darkness, as a bright one. There had been so much trouble and stress before it, I had been in such perplexity and terror concerning my gift. Now, with my eyes sealed, I had no possibility of using it or misusing it, and need not torment myself or be tormented. Once the nightmare of Drummant was past, I was among my own people. And the awe I inspired in some of the simpler ones was a compensation, though I didn't admit it, for my helplessness. While you're groping and blundering your way across a room, it can hearten you to hear somebody whispering, "What if he lifted his blindfold! I'd die of fear!"

My mother was unwell for a while after we got home and kept to her bed. Then she got up and began to go about the house as before; but one night at supper I heard her rise and say something in a frightened voice, and there was a commotion, and she and my father both left the room. I sat at table bereft, confused. I had to ask the women of the house what had happened. At first no one would tell me, but then one of the girls said, "Oh, she's bleeding, her skirts were all bloody." I was terrified. I went to the hall and sat in the hearth seat alone in a kind of daze. My father found me there at last. All he could say was that it was a miscarriage, and she was doing well enough. He spoke calmly, and I was reassured. I grasped at reassurance.

Gry came over on Blaze the next day. We went up to see my mother in her small tower room. There was a cot-bed there, and the room was warmer than the bedroom. A fire burned on the hearth, though it was full summer. Melle had her warmest shawl round her shoulders, as I knew from her embrace. Her voice was a little weak and hoarse but she sounded entirely herself. "Where's Coaly?" she said. "I need a visit from Coaly." Coaly was of course there in the room, for she and I were inseparable now; and she was invited up onto the bed, where she lay tensely alert, apparently believing my mother needed a guard dog. Mother asked about our lessons at guiding and being guided, and about Gry's horsebreaking, and we chatted along just as usual. But Gry got up before I was ready to go. She said we must be going, and as she kissed my mother she whispered, "I'm sorry about the baby."

Melle murmured to her, “I have you two.”

My father was gone from daybreak to evening every day at the work of the domain. I had begun to be of use to him, but was useless now. Alloc took my place at his side. Alloc was a clear-hearted man, without ambitions or pretensions; he thought of himself as stupid, and some people agreed with him, but though slow to think, he often grasped an idea without thinking about it, and his judgment was usually sound. He and Canoc worked together, and he was what I could not be. I was both jealous and envious of him. I had the self-respect not to show it; for it would have hurt Alloc, angered my father, and done me no good.

When my uselessness and helplessness carked me, when my own resolution weakened and I yearned to untie my blindfold and take back my whole lost inheritance of light, I came up against the immovable figure of my father. Seeing, I was a mortal danger to Canoc and to all his people. With my eyes sealed, I was his shield and support. My blindness was my use.

He had talked to me a little about the visit to Drummant, saying that he thought Ogge Drum had feared us both, but me most, and that his cruel teasing and scoffing had been a bluff, a show, to save face among his people. “What he most wanted was to drive us away. He was longing to test you, all right, but every time he was about to force you to act, he drew back. He didn’t dare. And he didn’t challenge me, for fear of you.”

“But that girl—he was using her to humiliate us!”

“He’d set that up before we knew of your wild gift. Caught himself in his own trap. He had to go through with it, to show he didn’t fear us. But he does, Orrec. He does.”

Our two white heifers were back at Caspromant, in with the herd in the high pastures, a long way from the borders of Drummant. Drum had said nothing about them and had made no retaliatory move on us or Roddmant. “I gave him his out, and he took it,” Canoc said with the vindictive glee that seemed to be his only cheer these days. He was always tense, always grim. With me and with my mother he was tender and cautious, but he never was with us for long, out at his work, or coming in silent with weariness, heavy with sleep.

Melle grew stronger slowly. There was a meek, patient note in her voice when she was unwell that I hated to hear. I wanted to hear her clear laugh,

her quick step through the rooms. She went about the house now, but tired easily, and whenever there was a rainy day or the wind coming down from the Carrantages chilled the summer evening, she had a fire in the tower room and sat huddled by it in the heavy shawl of undyed brown wool that my father's mother had woven for her. Once, sitting there with her, I said without thinking about it, "You've been cold ever since Drummant."

"Yes," she said. "I have. That last night. When I went to sit with the little girl. That was so strange. I don't think I ever told you about it, did I? Denno had gone downstairs to try to stop her sons from quarreling. Poor Daredan was so worn out, I told her to go sleep a while, I'd stay with Vardan. The poor little thing was asleep, but she always seemed to be just about to wake up, with the twitches and spasms that ran through her. So I put out the light and was drowsing along beside her, and after a while I thought I heard somebody whispering or chanting. A kind of droning. I thought I was in our house in Derris and Father was leading a service downstairs. I must have been nearly asleep myself. And it went on and on and then it died away. And I realised that I wasn't back home but at Drummant, and the fire had burned nearly out, and I was so cold I could hardly move. Cold to the bone. And the little girl was lying still as death. That scared me, and I got up to look at her, but she was breathing. And then Denno came in, and gave me a candle to come back to our room with. And Canoc wanted to go find Parn, so he left, and the door closing blew out the candle. And the fire was out. You woke, so I sat there in the dark with you, and I couldn't get warm. You remember that. And the whole ride home, my feet and hands were like lumps of ice. Ah! I wish we'd never gone there, Orrec!"

"I hate them."

"The women were kind to me."

"Father says Ogge was afraid of us."

"I return the compliment," Melle said with a little shudder.

When I told this tale to Gry—for I told Gry everything but the things I kept secret from myself—I could ask her what I hadn't wanted to ask my mother: Could Ogge Drum have come into that room while she was there? "Father says the Drums work their power with words, spells, as well as eye and hand. Maybe what she heard . . ."

Gry did not like that idea at all, and resisted it. “But why would he use it on her, not on you or Canoc? Melle couldn’t do him any harm!”

I thought of Canoc saying, “Wear your red gown, so he can see the gift he gave me.” That was the harm. But I hardly knew how to say it. All I could say was, “He hated us all.”

“Did she tell your father about that night?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know if she thinks it’s important. You know, she doesn’t . . . she doesn’t think about the gifts, the powers, very much. I don’t know even what she thinks about me, now. About the wild gift. She knows why we sealed my eyes. But I don’t think she believes . . .” I stopped, unsure of what I was saying and feeling myself on dangerous ground. Automatically I put my hand out to Coaly’s warm curly back as she lay stretched out beside my leg. But even Coaly couldn’t guide me in this darkness.

“Maybe you should tell Canoc,” Gry said.

“It would be better if Mother did.”

“You told me.”

“But you’re not Canoc,” I said, an obvious fact which contained a great deal of unsaid meaning. Gry understood it.

“I’ll ask Parn if there’s anything people can do . . . about that power,” she said.

“No, don’t.” Telling Gry was all right, but if the story went further I would have betrayed my mother’s confidence.

“I won’t say why I’m asking.”

“Parn will know why.”

“Maybe she already does . . . When you came to our place, that night. When Melle fainted. Mother said to Father, ‘He may have touched her.’ I didn’t know what she meant, then. I thought maybe she meant Ogge had tried to rape Melle, and hurt her.”

We sat brooding. The idea that Ogge had cast a wasting spell on my mother was hideous yet vague, hard to contemplate. My mind slid away from it, drifting to other things.

“She hasn’t said anything about Annren Barre since she was at Drummant,” Gry remarked, meaning her mother not mine.

“They’re still quarreling at Cordemant. Raddo said it’s an open feud between the brothers. They’re living at opposite ends of the domain, they

won’t get within eyesight of each other for fear of going blind or deaf.”

“Father says neither of the brothers has the full gift, but their sister Nanno does. Nanno says if they go on quarreling she’ll make them both into mutes, so they can’t speak the curse.” She laughed, and so did I. Such grotesque cruelties were funny to us. And I was suddenly light-hearted, too, because Parn was no longer talking of betrothing Gry to the boy at Cordemant.

“Mother says wild gifts are sometimes just very strong gifts. And it takes years to learn to use them.” Gry’s voice was husky, as it always was when she said something important.

I made no answer. None was needed. If Parn had meant that she believed my gift to be strong and to be ultimately controllable, she was saying that I might, in time, be a fit match for Gry. That was enough for us.

“I want to try the Ashbrook path,” I said, jumping up. Sitting and talking was all very well, but getting outside and riding was much better. I was full of hope and energy now, because Parn Barre who was wise had said I would be able to use my eyes again, and marry Gry, and kill Ogge Drum with a glance if he ever dared come near Caspromant. . . .

We rode along the Ashbrook. I asked Gry to tell me when we came to the destroyed hillside. We reined in the horses there. Coaly went running on ahead. When Gry called her back she came, but with a whimper, which was eloquent, since she very seldom said anything at all. “Coaly doesn’t like it here,” Gry said.

I asked her to describe the place. The grass was growing back, she said, but it still had a strange look. “All crumbled. Just lumps and dust. Nothing has any shape.”

“Chaos.”

“What’s Chaos?”

“It’s in Mother’s story about the beginning of the world. At first there was stuff floating around, but none of it had any shape or form. It was all just bits and crumbs and blobs, not even rocks or dirt, just stuff. With no forms or colors, and no ground or sky, or up and down, or north and south. No sense to anything. No direction. Nothing connected or related. It wasn’t dark, it wasn’t light. A mess. Chaos.”

“Then what happened?”

“Nothing ever would have happened if bits of stuff hadn’t stuck together a little, here and there. So the stuff began to make shapes. First just clods and lumps of dirt. Then stones. And the stones rubbed together and made sparks of fire, or melted one another till they ran as water. The fire and the water met and made steam, fog, mist, air—air the Spirit could breathe. Then the Spirit gathered itself together and drew breath, and spoke. It said everything that was to be. It sang to the earth and fire and water and air, singing all the creatures into being. All the shapes of mountains and rivers, the shapes of trees, and animals, and men. Only it took no shape itself, and gave itself no name, so that it could remain everywhere, in all things and between all things, in every relation and every direction. When everything is unmade at the end and Chaos returns, the Spirit will be in it as it was in the beginning.”

After a while Gry asked, “But it won’t be able to breathe?”

“Not until it all happens over again.”

Enlarging it, going into detail, and supplying an answer to Gry’s question, I had gone somewhat beyond the bounds of my mother’s story. I often did so. I had no sense of the sacredness of a story, or rather they were all sacred to me, the wonderful word-beings which, so long as I was hearing or telling them, made a world I could enter seeing, free to act: a world I knew and understood, that had its own rules, yet was under my control as the world beyond the stories was not. In the boredom and inactivity of my blindness, I lived increasingly in these stories, remembering them, asking my mother to tell them, and going on with them myself, giving them form, speaking them into being as the Spirit did in Chaos.

“Your gift is very strong,” Gry said in her husky voice.

I remembered then where we were. And I was ashamed of bringing Gry here, as if I’d wanted her to see what my power had done. Why had I wanted to bring her here?

“That tree,” I said, “there was a tree—” And I blurted out, “I thought it was my father. I thought I’d— I didn’t even know what I was looking at —”

I could say no more. I signaled Roanie to go on, and we left the ruined place. After a while Gry said, “It’s starting to grow back, Orrec. The weeds and the grass. I guess the Spirit is still in it.”

Chapter 13

AUTUMN WENT along much as summer had, with no great events to mark it. We heard that ever since our visit the quarrel between Brantor Ogge and his elder son Harba, that began on the boar hunt, had grown into enmity. Harba had taken his wife and people down to Rimmant and was living there, while the younger son, Sebb, was ensconced in the Stone House of Drummant, treated as the heir and brantor-to-be. But Sebb and Daredan's daughter Vardan had been ill all summer and was wasting away, going from seizure to convulsion to paralysis, and such mind as she had ever had was gone. We heard all about this from a travelling blacksmith's wife. Such people are great and useful gossips, carrying news from one domain to the other all over the Uplands, and we listened eagerly, though the woman's callous relish of details of the child's illness disgusted me. I didn't want to hear all that. I felt that I was in some way responsible for the girl's misery.

When I asked myself how that could possibly be, I saw in my mind's eye the face of Ogge Drum, pouched and creased, with drooping eyelids and an adder's gaze.

Gry couldn't come to visit me often while the work of harvest was going on and every hand was needed every day. And there was no need for her to give Coaly and me further training; we were by now, as my mother said, a six-legged boy with an unusually keen sense of smell.

But along in October, Gry rode Blaze over for the day, and after Coaly and I had shown her whatever our new achievements were, we settled down, as always, to talk. We discussed the quarrels at Cordemant and Drummant, and remarked sagely that as long as they were busy feuding with their own people they were less apt to invade and poach and thieve across their borders. We mentioned Vardan. Gry had heard that the child was dying.

“Could it have been Ogge, do you think?” I asked. “That night. When my mother was there, and heard . . . He could have been casting his power on the girl.”

“And not on Melle?”

“Maybe not.” I had worked out this hopeful idea some while ago and it had seemed plausible to me; spoken, less so.

“Why would he put the wasting on his own granddaughter?”

“Because he was ashamed of her. Wanted her dead. She was . . .” I heard the thick, weak voice, *Do you do*, *do you do*. “She was an idiot,” I said harshly. And I thought of the dog Hamneda.

Gry did not say anything. I had the sense that she wanted to speak but found she couldn’t.

“Mother’s been much better,” I said. “She walked all the way to the Little Glen with Coaly and me.”

“That’s good,” Gry said. She did not say and I would not think that, six months ago, such a walk would have been nothing to Melle; she would have gone on with me and climbed to the spring in the high hills and come home singing. I would not think the thought but it was there. I said, “Tell me what she looks like.”

That was an order Gry never disobeyed; when I asked her to be my eyes, she tried as best she could to see for me. “She’s thin,” she said.

I knew that from her hands.

“She looks a little sad. But just as beautiful.”

“She doesn’t look ill?”

“No. Only thin. And tired, or sad. Losing the baby . . .”

I nodded. After a while I said, “She’s been telling me a long story. It’s part of Hamneda’s story. About his friend Omnan, who went mad and tried to kill him. I can tell you part of it.”

“Yes!” said Gry in a contented tone, and I could hear her settle herself to listen. I reached out to Coaly’s back and left my hand there. That touch was my anchor in the unseen real world, while I launched out into the bright, vivid world of story.

Nothing we had said about my mother had been dire, or even discouraging, yet without saying it we had said that she was not well, that she was not getting better, that she was getting worse. We both knew it.

My mother knew it. She was bewildered and patient. She tried to be well. She couldn't believe that she couldn't do what she had used to do, or half what she had used to do. "This is so foolish," she would say, the nearest she ever came to complaint.

My father knew it. As the days shortened and the work lessened and he was home longer and more often, he had to see that Melle was weak, that she tired easily, that she ate little and had grown thin, that some days all she could do was sit by her fire in her brown shawl and shiver and doze. "I'll be well when it gets warm again," she would say. He would build up her fire and seek what else he could do, anything to do for her. "What can I bring you, Melle?" I could not see his face, but I heard his voice, and the tenderness of it made me wince with pain.

My blindfold and my mother's illness worked together in one way that was good: we both had time to indulge our love of storytelling, and the stories carried us out of the dark and the cold and the dreary boredom of being useless. Melle had a wonderful memory, and whenever she searched it she found in it another story she had been told or had read. If she forgot part of the tale, she, like me, filled in and invented freely, even if it was a story from the holy texts and rituals, for who was to be shocked and cry heresy, here? I told her she was a well: she let down the bucket and it came up full of stories. She laughed at that. And she said, "I'd like to write down some of the things in the bucket."

I couldn't prepare the linen and ink for her myself, but I could tell Rab and Sosso, our two young housekeepers, how to go about it, and they were happy to do anything for Melle.

These two women were Caspros through their fathers, neither of whom had had any gift of the lineage. They inherited their position in the household from their mothers, who, together with my mother, had trained them thoroughly. During Melle's illness they took full control of domestic matters, running the house according to her standards, and always plotting how to make her life easier. They were warmhearted, energetic women. Rab was engaged to be married to Alloc, though neither seemed to be in a hurry to marry. Sosso had announced that in her opinion there were enough men underfoot already.

They learned to stretch the canvas and mix the ink, and my father devised a kind of bed table, and Melle set to writing down all she could

remember of the sacred tales and songs she had learned as a girl. Some days she wrote for two or three hours. She never said why she was writing. She never said that it was for me. She never said that to write was to affirm that one day I'd be able to read what she wrote. She never said that she wrote because she knew she might not be here to speak. She said only, when Canoc anxiously scolded her for wearing herself out at the writing, "It makes me feel that everything I learned when I was a girl isn't just going to waste. When I write it down, I can think about it."

So she would write in the morning, and rest in the afternoon. Towards evening Coaly and I would come to her room, and often Canoc, and she'd go on with whatever hero tale we were in the midst of, or a story of the time when Cumbelo was King, and we'd listen to her, there by the hearth, in the tower room, in the heart of winter.

Sometimes she said, "Orrec, you go on with it now." She wanted to know, she said, if I remembered the stories, if I could tell them well.

More and more often she began the story, and I ended it. One day she said, "I'm too lazy to tell a story. Tell me one."

"Which one?"

"Make one up."

How did she know I made stories up, following them in my mind through the long dull hours?

"I thought about some things Hamneda might have done while he was in Algalanda, that weren't in the story."

"Tell them."

"Well, after Omnan left him in the desert, you know, and he had to find his way alone . . . I thought about how thirsty he was. It was all dust, the desert, as far as the eye could see, hills and valleys of red dust. Nothing growing, no sign of a spring. If he didn't find water, he'd die there. So he began walking, going north by the sun, for no reason except that north was the way home to Bendraman. He walked and he walked, and the sun beat on his head and back, and the wind blew the dust in his eyes and nostrils so it was hard to breathe. The wind got stronger and began to blow the dust in circles, and a whirlwind rose up in front of him and came towards him, picking up the red dust and whirling it high. He didn't try to run away, but stood still and held out his arms, and the whirlwind came on him and picked him up, whirled him up into the air, coughing and choking with the

dust. It carried him over the desert, whirling him round all the time and choking him. Finally the sun began to set. Then the wind dropped. And the whirlwind died down, and sank down, and dropped Hamneda at the gates of a city. His head was still whirling, he was too dizzy to stand up, and covered all over with red dust. He crouched there with his head down, trying to catch his breath, and the guards at the gate peered at him. It was twilight. One said, ‘Somebody left a big clay jar there,’ and the other one said, ‘It’s not a jar, it’s a figure, a statue. A statue of a dog. It must be a gift to the king.’ And they decided to carry it into the city . . .”

“Go on,” Melle murmured. And I went on.

But now I come to a place in this story I do not want to go through. A desert. No whirlwind to pick me up and carry me across it.

Every day was one step farther into it.

There came a day when my mother put away the canvas and ink and said she was too tired to write any more for a while. There came a day when she asked me to tell a story, but shivered and dozed through it, not hearing it, only hearing my voice. “Don’t stop,” she said, when, thinking I was only making her more wretched, I tried to let my voice die away so she could sleep. “Don’t stop.”

At the edge of the desert you think it may be wide. You think it could take a month, maybe, to cross it. And two months go by, and three, and four, every day a step farther into the dust.

Rab and Sosso were kind and strong, but when Melle grew too weak to look after herself at all, Canoc told them that he would see to her needs. He did so with the most delicate patience, caring for her, lifting her, cleaning her, soothing her, trying to keep her warm. For two months he scarcely left the tower room. Coaly and I were there most of the day, if only to keep him silent company. At night he kept vigil alone.

He fell asleep sometimes in the daytime, beside her on the narrow bed; weak as she was, she would whisper, “Lie down, love. You must be tired. Keep me warm. Come under the shawl with me.” And he would lie beside her, holding her close to him, and I would listen to their breathing.

May came. One morning I sat in the window seat, feeling the sunlight on my hands; I smelled the fragrances of spring, and heard the sound of the light wind moving in young leaves. Canoc lifted Melle so Sosso could change the sheet. She weighed so little now, he could pick her up in his

arms like a little child. She cried out sharply. I did not know then what had happened. Her bones had grown so fragile that when he lifted her, they broke; her collarbone and thighbone snapped like sticks.

He set her down on the bed. She had fainted. Sosso hurried out to fetch help. It was the only time in all those months that Canoc gave way. He crouched down at the bedside and wept, loudly, gasping with a terrible sound, hiding his face in the sheets. I huddled in the window seat, hearing him.

They came with some idea of tying splints to her limbs to keep them in place, but he would not let them touch her.

The next day I was out at the gate of the courtyard, letting Coaly have a run, when Rab called me. Coaly came as quickly as I did. We went up to the tower room. Mother was lying among pillows, her old brown shawl about her shoulders; I felt it under my hand when I went to kiss her. Her hand and cheek were icy cold, but she returned my kiss. “Orrec,” she whispered. “I want to see your eyes.” And when she felt me resist, “You can’t hurt me now, love,” she whispered.

I still hesitated.

“Go on,” Canoc said, across the bed from me, his voice quiet, as it always was in this room.

So I tugged the blindfold down and pulled the two pads away from my eyes, and tried to open my eyes. At first I thought I could not. I had to push up the lids with my fingers, and when I did, I saw nothing but a flashing, lancing, painful dazzle, a jumble, a chaos of light.

Then my eyes remembered their skill, and I saw my mother’s face.

“There, there,” she said, “that’s right.” Her eyes looked up into mine out of the little sunken ruin of her face and body, the tangle of black hair. “That’s right,” she said again quite strongly. “You keep this for me.” She opened her hand. Her opal and the silver chain lay in it. She could not lift her hand to give it to me. I took it and put the chain over my head. “Ennu, hear and be here,” she murmured. Then she closed her eyes.

I looked up at my father. His face was hard and set. He nodded very slightly.

I kissed my mother’s cheek again, and put the pads over my eyes, and pulled up my blindfold.

Coaly tugged slightly at the leash, and I let her lead me out of the room.

That day a little after sunset my mother died.

♦

GRIEVING, LIKE BEING blind, is a strange business; you have to learn how to do it. We seek company in mourning, but after the early bursts of tears, after the praises have been spoken, and the good days remembered, and the lament cried, and the grave closed, there is no company in grief. It is a burden borne alone. How you bear it is up to you. Or so it seems to me. Maybe in saying so I'm ungrateful to Gry, and to the people of the house and domain, my companions, without whom I might not have carried my burden through the dark year.

So I call it in my mind: the dark year.

To try to tell it is like trying to tell the passage of a sleepless night. Nothing happens. One thinks, and dreams briefly, and wakes again; fears loom and pass, and ideas won't come clear, and meaningless words haunt the mind, and the shudder of nightmare brushes by, and time seems not to move, and it's dark, and nothing happens.

Canoc and I were not companions in our grief. We could not be. However untimely and cruel my loss, I had lost only what time must take and can replace. For him there was no replacement; the sweetness of his life was gone.

Because he was left solitary, and because he blamed himself, his sorrow was hard, and angry, and found no relief.

After Melle's death some of the people of the domain went in fear of Canoc as well as me. I had the wild gift, and now what might not he do in his bitter grief? We were the descendants of Caddard. And we had legitimate cause for anger. Every soul in Caspromant believed as a certainty that Ogge Drum had killed Melle Aulitta. She died a year and a day after the night we left Drummant. There was no need of the story she had told me and I had told Gry of that last night there, the whispering and the cold. We had told it to no one; I never knew whether she told it to Canoc. All he or anyone needed to know was that she had gone to Drummant a beautiful and radiant woman, and had come back ill, to lose the child she carried, and waste away, and die.

Canoc was a strong man, but the last months had taken a hard toll on both his body and mind. He was worn out. For the first halfmonth he slept a great deal—in her room, in the bed where he had held her as she died. He spent hours alone there. Rab and Sosso and the others were afraid for him and afraid of him. They used me as go-between. “Just slip up there, will you, and make sure the brantor’s not needing anything,” the women would say, and Alloc or one of the other men would say, “Just go up and ask the brantor does he want the horse to have bran or oats?”—for old Greylag was off his feed, and they were concerned about him. Coaly and I would go up the curving stone stairs to the tower room, and I would get up my nerve and knock. Sometimes he answered, sometimes not. When he did open the door, his voice was cold and flat. “Tell them no,” he would say, or, “Tell Alloc to use his wits,” and he would close the door again.

I dreaded to come where I was not wanted, but I had no physical fear of him. I knew he would never use his power against me, as Melle had known I would never use mine against her.

When I realised that, when I thought of it that way, a shock ran through me. This was no mere belief, it was knowledge. I knew he would not hurt me. I knew I would not have hurt her. So I could have taken off my blindfold, when I was with her. I could have seen her, all that last year. I could have cared for her, been useful to her, read to her, as well as telling my foolish stories. I could have seen her dear face not that once, but all year, all year long!

That idea brought me not tears, but a surge of anger that must have been something like what my father was feeling—a dry fury of impotent regret.

There was no one to punish for it but myself, or him.

On the night she died I had clung to him, and he had held me against him, my head on his chest. Since then he had scarcely touched me, and spoken very little to me; he had shut himself up in her room and held aloof. He wants his grief all to himself, I thought with a bitter heart.

Chapter 14

ALL SPRING, Ternoc and Parn had come back and forth from Roddmant as often as they could. Ternoc was a kindly man, a follower not a leader, who was not very happy with his wilful wife but never complained of her. He had looked up to my father all his life; he had loved my mother dearly and mourned her now. Late in June he came over, went up to the tower room, and talked with Canoc for a long time. Canoc came downstairs to supper with him that evening, and from that day on ceased to lock himself away, returning to his work and duties, though he slept always in the tower room. He spoke to me, stiffly and with effort, as in duty bound. I responded the same way.

I had hoped Parn might know how to help my mother in her illness, but Parn was a hunter not a healer. She was uneasy in a sickroom, impatient, not of much use. At my mother's funeral, Parn had led the lament, the sobbing howl that Upland women raise over the grave. It is a hideous shrill clamor, going on and on and on, unbearable, the noise of animals in pain. Coaly raised her head and howled with the women, shuddering all over, and I too stood shuddering and fighting my tears. When it was over at last I was spent, exhausted, relieved. Canoc had stood through the lament unmoving, enduring it, like a rock in the rain.

Soon after Melle's death, Parn went up to the Carrantages. The people of Borremant had heard of her skill in calling to the hunt and sent for her to come. She wanted Gry to come with her, to begin to practice her gift. It was a rare chance to go among the wealthy highlanders and gain renown there. Gry refused. Parn got angry with her. Once again mild Ternoc intervened: "You go and come as you please," he said to his wife, "so let your daughter do the same." Parn saw the justice in that, though it didn't suit her. She went off the next day, without Gry, not bidding anyone goodbye.

The colt Blaze had been returned, fully trained, to Cordemant. When Gry came to us, she rode a plow horse, if one was free; if not she walked, a long walk to go and return in a day. It was too far for me to go alone on Roanie or to walk with Coaly. And Roanie was getting old, and though Greylag got over his distemper he too was an old horse now. Branty was a splendid four-year-old, much in demand as a stud, which suited him very well indeed, though it interfered with his other duties. Our stable was pretty thin. I said one night, gathering up my nerve as I always did when I spoke to my father now, “We should get a new colt.”

“I’d thought of asking Danno Barre what he’d want for that grey mare.”

“She’s old. If we got a colt or a filly, Gry could train her.”

When you cannot see the speaker, his silence is a mystery. I waited, not knowing if Canoc was considering what I said or had rejected it already.

“I’ll look about,” he said.

“Alloc says there’s a lovely filly over at Callemmant. He heard about her from the smith.”

This time the silence went on. I had to wait a month for the answer. It arrived in the shape of Alloc shouting at me to come out and see the new filly. I couldn’t do that, but I could come and feel her coat, and scratch her topknot, and swing up in the saddle for a short led walk round the courtyard, Alloc praising her manners and beauty all the way. She was just a year old, he said, a bright bay, with a star, for which she was named. “Can Gry come and work with her?” I asked, and Alloc said, “Oh, she’s to stay there at Roddmant for a year or so and learn her job. She’s too young a lass for your father and me, see.”

When Canoc came in that night, I wanted to thank him. I wanted to go to him and put my arms around him. But I was afraid of blundering in my blindness, afraid of making a clumsy move, afraid he did not want me to touch him.

I said, “I rode the filly, Father,” and he said, “Good,” and bade me goodnight, and I heard his weary tread on the stairs up to the tower room.

♦

SO THROUGH the dark time, Gry could come to me riding Star, two or three or four times in a halfmonth, sometimes even oftener.

When she came we would go out riding together and she would tell me what she and Star were doing. The filly was as sweet as new bread, and as a riding horse needed little teaching, so she was learning fancy gaits and tricks, to show off the trainer, Gry said, as well as the horse. We seldom rode far, for Roanie was getting rheumatic. Then we'd come back to the Stone House, and if it was warm we'd sit out in the kitchen gardens, or in cold or rainy weather in the corner of the great hearth, to talk.

There were many times in the first year after my mother died that though I was glad Gry was there, I could not talk. I had nothing to say. There was a blankness, a deadness around me I could not get through with words.

Gry would talk a little, telling me what news she had, and then fall into silence with me. It was as easy to sit in silence with her as it was with Coaly. I was grateful to her for that.

I cannot remember much of that year. I had sunk into the black blankness. There was nothing for me to do. My only use was to be useless. I would never learn to use my gift: only not to use it. I would sit here in the hall of the Stone House and people would be afraid of me, and that was all my purpose in life. I might as well be an idiot like the poor child at Drummant. It would make no difference. I was a bogey in a blindfold.

For days at a time I said nothing to anyone. Sosso and Rab and the other people about the house tried to talk to me, cheer me; they brought me tidbits from the kitchen; Rab was brave enough to offer me tasks to do in the household, things I needed no eyes to do and had done for her gladly when I was first blinded. Not now. Alloc would come in with my father at day's end, and they would talk a little, and I would sit with them in silence. Alloc would try to draw me into the conversation. I would not be drawn. Canoc would say to me, stiffly, "Are you well, Orrec?" or, "Did you ride today?" And I would say yes.

I think now he suffered as much as I did from our estrangement. All I knew then was that he was not paying the price I paid for our gift.

All through that winter, I made plans of how I could get to Drummant, get within sight of Ogge, and destroy him. I would have to take off the blindfold, of course. Over and over I imagined it: I would go out before daylight, taking Branty, for the older horses were not fast or strong enough. I'd ride all day to Drummant, and wait hidden somewhere till

night, and wait till Ogge came out. No, better, I might disguise myself. The people at Drummant had only seen me with the blindfold, and I was growing taller, my voice had begun to deepen. I'd wear a serf's cloak, not the coat and kilt. They wouldn't know me. I'd leave Branty hidden in the woods, for he was a horse people would recognise, and I'd stroll in on foot, like a roving farmer lad from the Glens, and wait till Ogge appeared: and then, with one look, one word— And as they all stood in horror and amazement, I'd slip out, back to the woods, back to Branty, gallop home, and say to Canoc, "You were afraid to go kill him, so I did it."

But I did not do it. I believed the story as I told it to myself, but not when it was over.

I told it to myself so often that I wore it out, and then I had no story to tell at all.

I went far into the dark, that year.

Somewhere in the dark at last I turned around, not knowing I was doing so. It was Chaos, there was no forward and back, no direction; but I turned, and the way I went then was back, towards the light. Coaly was my companion in the dark and the silence. Gry was my guide on the way back.

She came once when I was sitting in the hearth seat. There was no fire, it was May or June, and only the kitchen fire was lighted; but the hearth seat was where I sat most of the day, most days. I heard her come, the light clatter of Star's hoofs in the courtyard, Gry's voice, Sosso greeting her and saying, "He's where he always is"—and then her hand on my shoulder; but more, this time; she leaned down and kissed my cheek.

I had not been kissed, I had scarcely been touched, by any human being since my mother's death. The touch ran through my body like lightning through a cloud. I caught my breath with the shock and sweetness of it.

"Ash-Prince," Gry said. She smelled of horse sweat and grass, and her voice was the wind in the leaves. She sat down beside me. "Do you remember that?"

I shook my head.

"Oh, you must. You remember all the stories. But that one was a long time ago. When we were little."

I still said nothing. The habit of silence is lead on the tongue. She went on, "The Ash-Prince was the boy who slept in the hearth corner because his parents wouldn't let him have a bed—"

“Foster parents.”

“That’s right. His parents lost him. How do you lose a boy? They must have been very careless.”

“They were a king and queen. A witch stole him.”

“That’s right! He went outdoors to play, and the witch came out of the forest—and she held out a sweet ripe pear—and as soon as he bit into it she said, ‘Ah, ha, sticky-chin, you’re mine!’ ” Gry laughed with delight as she recovered this. “So they called him Stickychin! But then what happened?”

“The witch gave him to a poor couple who already had six children and didn’t want a seventh. But she paid them with a gold piece to take him in and bring him up.” The language, the rhythm of the words, brought the story I had not thought of for ten years straight to my mind, and with it the music of my mother’s voice as she told it. “So he became their serf and servant, at their beck and call, and it was, ‘Stickychin, do this!’ and ‘Stickychin, do that!’ and never a free moment for him till late at night when all the work was done and he could creep into the hearth corner and sleep in the warm ashes.”

I stopped.

“Oh, Orrec, go on,” Gry said very low.

So I went on and told the tale of the Ash-Prince, and how he came into his kingdom at last.

When I was done there was a little silence. Gry blew her nose. “Think of crying over a fairy tale,” she said. “But it made me think of Melle . . . Coaly, you have ashy paws. Give me your paw. Yes.” Some cleaning operation ensued, and Coaly stood up and shook herself with great vigor. “Let’s go out,” said Gry, and she too stood up, but I sat still.

“Come see what Star can do,” she coaxed.

She said “see,” and so did I usually, for it’s laborious to find some other, more exact, exclusive word every time; but this time, because something had changed in me, because I had turned around and did not know it, I broke out—“I can’t see what Star does. I can’t see anything. There’s no use in it, Gry. Go on home. It’s stupid, you coming here. It’s no use.”

There was a little pause. Gry said, “I can decide that for myself, Orrec.”

“Then do it. Use your head!”

“Use your own. There’s nothing wrong with it except that you don’t use it any more. Exactly like your eyes!”

At that the rage broke out in me, the old, stifling, smothering rage of frustration I had felt when I tried to use my gift. I reached out for my staff, Blind Caddard’s staff, and stood up. “Get out, Gry,” I said. “Get out before I hurt you.”

“Lift your blindfold, then!”

Goaded to fury, I struck out at her with the staff—blindly. The blow fell on air and darkness.

Coaly gave a sharp, warning bark, and I felt her come up hard against my knees, blocking me from going forward.

I reached down and stroked her head. “It’s all right, Coaly,” I muttered. I was shaking with stress and shame.

Gry spoke presently from a little distance away. “I’ll be in the stable. Roanie hasn’t been out for days. I want to look at her legs. We can ride if you want to.” And she left.

I rubbed my hands over my face. Both hands and face felt gritty. I was probably smearing ash on my face and hair. I went to the scullery and stuck my head in the water and washed my hands, and then told Coaly to take me to the stable. My legs were still shaky. I felt as I thought a very old man must feel; and Coaly knew it, going slower than usual, taking care of me.

My father and Alloc were out on the stallions. Roanie had the stable to herself and was in the big stall, where the horse could lie down. Coaly led me to her. Gry said, “Feel here. That’s the rheumatism.” She took my hand and guided it to the horse’s foreleg, the hock and powerful, delicate cannon bone up to the knee. I could feel the burning heat in the joints.

“Oh, Roanie,” Gry said, softly whacking the old mare, who groaned and leaned up against her as she always did when she was petted or curried.

“I don’t know if I should be riding her,” I said.

“I don’t know. She should have some exercise, though.”

“I can walk her out.”

“Maybe you should. You’ve got so much heavier.”

It was true. Inactive as I had been for so long, and though food had little taste or savor to it ever since I had put on the blindfold, I was always hungry, and Rab and Sosso and the kitchen girls could feed me if they

could do nothing else for me. I had put on weight, and grown taller so fast that my bones ached at night. I was always knocking my head on lintels that hadn't been anywhere near it last year.

I put the lead on Roanie's bridle—I had considerable skill at doing such things by now—and led her out, while Gry took Star to the mounting block and got up on her bareback. So we went out of the courtyard and up the glen path, Coaly leading me and I leading Roanie. I could hear how uneven her steps were behind me. "It's like she's saying *ow, ow, ow*," I said.

"She is," said Gry, riding ahead.

"Can you hear her?"

"If I make the link."

"Can you hear me?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I can't make the link."

"Why not?"

"Words get in the way. Words and . . . everything. I can make a link with little tiny babies. That's how we know when a woman's pregnant. We can make a link. But as the baby gets human, it goes out of reach. You can't call, you can't hear."

We went on in silence. The farther we went, the easier it seemed to be for Roanie, so we circled round to the Ashbrook path. I said, "Tell me what it looks like, when we come to that place."

"It hasn't changed much," Gry said when we came past the ruined hillside. "A little more grass. But it's still what's-its-name."

"Chaos. Is the tree still there?"

"Just a snag of it."

We turned back there. I said, "You know, what's strange is that I can't even remember doing that. As if I opened my eyes and it was done."

"But isn't that how your gift works?"

"No. Not with your eyes closed! Why else am I wearing this damned bandage? So I can't do it!"

"But being a wild gift— You didn't mean to do it— And it happened so fast—"

"I suppose so." But I had meant to do it, I thought.

Roanie and I plodded on while the others danced before us.

“Orrec, I’m sorry I said to lift your blindfold.”

“I’m sorry I missed you with that staff.”

She didn’t laugh, but I felt better.

♦

IT WAS NOT THAT day, but not very long after, that Gry asked me about the books—meaning what Melle had written in the autumn and winter of her illness. She asked where the books were.

“In the chest in her room.” I still jealously thought of it as her room, though it was where Canoc had sat and slept for a year and a half now.

“I wonder if I could read them.”

“You’re the only person in the Uplands that could,” I said with the random bitterness that came into all my words now.

“I don’t know. It was always so hard. I can’t remember some of the letters now . . . But you could read them.”

“Oh yes. When I take the blindfold off. When pigs fly.”

“But listen, Orrec.”

“That’s the one thing I can do.”

“You could try reading. You could try just for a little while, just with one of the books. Not looking at anything else.” Gry’s voice had gone husky. “You aren’t going to destroy everything you look at! If all you look at is what your mother wrote! She wrote it all for you.”

Gry did not know that I had seen Melle’s face before she died. No one knew that but my father. No one knew what I knew, that I would never have hurt Melle. Would I destroy, now, the one thing she had left me?

I couldn’t answer Gry at all.

I had never promised my father not to lift the blindfold. There was no bond of words, but there was a bond, and it held me. Yet it had held me when there was no need for it—it had kept me from seeing my mother all the last year of her life, and made me useless to her, for no reason. Or rather, for the reason that my blindness was useful to my father, making me his weapon, his threat against enemies. But was my loyalty only to him?

I could not get any further than that for a long time. Gry said no more about it, and I thought I had put it out of my head.

But along in the autumn, as we were in the stable together, I rubbing liniment into Roanie's knees and Canoc paring at a hoof that was giving Greylag trouble, I said abruptly, "Father, I want to see those books Mother wrote."

"Books?" he said in a bewildered voice.

"The book she made me a long time ago, and the ones she wrote when she was sick. They're in the chest. In the tower room."

Out of a silence he said, "What good are they to you?"

"I want to have them. She made them for me."

"Take them if you want."

"I will," I said, and Roanie stepped back, because in fighting my anger I had gripped her sore knee too hard. I hated my father. He cared nothing for me, nothing for the work my mother had spent her last energy on, nothing for anything but being Brantor of Caspromant and forcing everybody to his will.

I finished with the mare, washed my hands, and went straight to the tower room while I knew my father would not be there. Coaly led me eagerly up the stairs, as if she expected to find Melle there. The room was cold and had a desolate feel to it. I blundered about finding the chest, and put my hand out to find the footboard of the bed. The shawl lay folded on it, the brown shawl my grandmother had woven and my mother had worn when she was cold, when she was dying. I knew the feel of it, the rough softness of the homespun wool. I stooped and buried my face in it. But I did not breathe in the scent of my mother, the faint fragrance I remembered. The shawl smelled of sweat and salt.

"To the window, Coaly," I said, and we managed to locate the chest. I raised the lid and felt the sheets of linen canvas stacked inside it. There was much more than I could carry one-handed. I felt down among the stiff pieces until I came to the bound book, the first she had made me, the *History of Lord Raniu*. I took it out and closed the lid. As Coaly led me out of the room I reached out and touched the shawl again, with a queer pinching at my heart that I didn't try to understand.

All I had in mind was to have the book, to have the thing Mother had given me, made for me, left to me. That was enough. So I thought. I put it on the table in my room, where everything had its place and was never out

of its place and no one was allowed to touch anything. I went in to supper, and ate in silence with my silent father.

At the end of the meal, he asked, “Did you find the book?” He said the word hesitantly.

I nodded, with a sudden spiteful pleasure, jeering at him in my mind: You don’t know what it is, you don’t know what to do with it, you can’t read!

And when I was alone in my room, I sat at the table for some while, and then deliberately and carefully slipped off the blindfold and took the pads from my eyes.

And saw darkness.

I almost screamed aloud. My heart beat with terror and my head spun, and it was I don’t know how long before I realised that somewhere in front of me hung a shape full of tiny blurred silver specks. I was seeing it. It was the window frame, and the stars.

There was, after all, no light in my room. I would have to go to the kitchen to fetch a flint and steel and a lamp or candle. And what would they say in the kitchen if I asked for such things?

As I grew a little more used to seeing, I could make out the whitish oblong of the book on the table in the starlight. I ran my hand over it, and saw the shadowy movement. To make the movement and to see it gave me such pleasure that I did it again and again. I looked up, and saw the autumn stars. I gazed at them long enough that I saw their slow movement to the west. It was enough.

I put the pads back over my eyes and tied the blindfold carefully, and undressed, and got into bed.

I had never thought for a moment, as I looked at the book and my hand, that I might destroy them; the thought of my perilous gift had not entered my mind; it had been filled with the gift of seeing. Because I could see, could I destroy the stars?

Chapter 15

FOR MANY days it was enough to have the pages Melle had written for me, which I brought down to my room and kept in a carved box. I read them every morning at first light, waking when the cocks began to crow, getting up to sit at the table with the blindfold round my forehead, ready to pull it down over my eyes should someone enter the room. I was scrupulous not to look anywhere but at the written leaves, and—once at the beginning, once at the end—up at the window, to see the sky. I reasoned that I could do no harm reading my mother's writing and looking up into the light.

I was particularly careful, though it was extremely difficult, not to look at Coaly. I longed to see her. If she was in the room, I knew I could not keep my eyes from her; and that idea sent a chill through me. I tried to sit with my hands cupped around my eyes so I could see only the writing, but it was not safe. I shut my eyes and shut poor Coaly out of the room. "Stay," I told her outside my door, and I heard her tail give a small, obedient thump. I felt like a traitor when I shut the door.

I was often puzzled to know what I was reading, for the linen pages had been put away in the chest in no order and further confused by my carrying them away; and my mother had written down whatever she could remember as it came into her head, often only bits and passages without beginning or end or anything to explain them. When she first began to write, she had put in notes: "This is from the Worship of Ennu my Grandmother taught me, it is for women to speak," or "I do not know more of this Tale of the Blessed Momu." Several of the pages were headed "For My Son Orrec of Caspromant." One of the earlier ones, a legend about the founding of Derris Water, was titled "Drops from the Bucket of the Well of Melle Aulitta of Derris Water and Caspromant, for My Dear Son." As her illness grew worse, which I could see in the weakness and hastiness of the

writing, there were no explanations and more fragments. And instead of stories there were poems and chants, all written out in cramped lines clear across the sheet, so that I only heard the poetry if I spoke it aloud. Some of the later pages were very hard to decipher. The last—it had been the topmost in the trunk, and I had kept it in place—had only a few pale lines written on it. I remembered how she said she was too tired to write any more for a while.

I suppose it seems strange that, after the intense delight of reading these precious gifts my mother left for me, I was willing to close the darkness down on my eyes again and stumble through the day led by a dog. I was not merely willing, I was ready. The only way I could defend Caspromant was by being blind, so I was blind. I had found a redeeming joy to lighten my duty, but it was no less my duty.

I was aware that I hadn't found this redemption for myself. It was Gry who had said, "You could read them." It being autumn, she was busy at Roddmant with the harvest and could seldom come over; but as soon as she did, I took her to my room and showed her the box of writings and told her that I was reading them.

She seemed more distracted or embarrassed than pleased, and was in a hurry to leave the room. She had a keener sense than I did, of course, of the risk she ran. People of the domains were by no means strict with girls, and nobody in the Uplands saw anything unseemly in young people riding and walking and talking together outdoors or where other people might come; but for a girl of fifteen to go to a boy's bedroom was going too far. Rab and Sosso would have scolded us savagely, and worse, some of the others, the spinning women or the kitchen help, might have gossiped. When this possibility finally dawned upon me, I felt my face turn red. We went outdoors without a word, and weren't easy with each other till we had talked about horses for half an hour.

Then we were able to discuss what I had been reading. I recited one of the chants of Odressel for Gry. It exalted my heart, but she wasn't much impressed. She preferred stories. I couldn't explain to her how the poems I read fascinated me. I tried to work out how they were put together, how this word returned, or this sound or rhyme came back, or the beat wove through the words. All this hung in my mind as I went about the rest of the day in the darkness. I would try to fit words of my own into the patterns I

had found, and sometimes it worked. That gave me intense, pure pleasure, a pleasure that endured, returning each time I thought of those words, that pattern, that poem.

Gry was low in spirits that day, and again the next time she came. It was rainy October by then, and we sat in the chimney corner to talk. Rab brought us a plate full of oatcakes and I slowly devoured them while Gry sat mostly silent. At last she said, “Orrec, why do you think we have the gifts?”

“To defend our people with.”

“Not mine.”

“No; but you can hunt for them, help them get food, train animals to work for them.”

“Yes. But your gift. Or Father’s. To destroy. To kill.”

“There has to be somebody who can do it.”

“I know. But did you know . . . Father can take a splinter out of your finger, or a thorn out of your foot, with the knife gift. So neat and quick, it only bleeds one drop. He just looks, and it’s out . . . And Nanno Corde. She can make people deaf and blind, but did you know she unsealed a deaf boy’s ears? He was deaf and dumb, he could only make signs with his mother, but now he can hear enough to learn to talk. She says she did it the same way she’d deafen somebody, only one way goes forward and the other backward.”

That was intriguing, and we discussed it a little, but it didn’t mean much to me. It did to Gry. She said, “I wonder if all the gifts are backward.”

“What do you mean?”

“Not the calling. You can use it forward or backward. But the knife, or the Cordes’ sealing—maybe they’re backward. Maybe they were useful for curing people, to begin with. For healing. And then people found out they could be weapons and began to use them that way, and forgot the other way . . . Even the rein, that the Tibros have, maybe at first it was just a gift of working with people, and then they made it go backward, to make people work for them.”

“What about the Morgas?” I asked. “Their gift isn’t a weapon.”

“No— It’s only good for finding out what people are sick with, so you know how to heal them. It doesn’t work for making them sick. It only goes

forward. That's why the Morgas have to hide out back there where nobody else comes."

"All right. But some of the gifts never went forward. What about the Helvars' cleaning? What about my gift?"

"They could have been healing, to begin with. If there was something wrong inside a person, or an animal, something out of order, like a hard knot—maybe it was a gift of untying it—setting it right, putting it in order."

That had an unexpected ring of probability to me. I knew exactly what she meant. It was like the poetry I made in my head, the tangled confusion of words that fell suddenly into a pattern, a clarity, and you recognised it: that's it, that's right.

"But then why did we stop doing that and only use it to make people's insides into an awful mess?"

"Because there are so many enemies. But maybe also because you can't use the gift both ways. You can't go backward and forward at the same time."

I knew from her voice that she was saying something important to her. It had to do with her use of her own gift, but I wasn't certain what it was.

"Well, if anybody could teach me how to use my gift to do instead of undo, I'd try to learn," I said, not too seriously.

"Would you?" She was serious.

"No," I said. "Not till I'd destroyed Ogge Drum."

She gave a great sigh.

I brought my fist down on the stone of the hearth seat and said, "I will. I will destroy that fat adder, when I can! Why doesn't Canoc? What's he waiting for? For me? He knows I can't—I can't control the gift— *He* can. How can he sit here and not go revenge my mother!"

I had never said this before to Gry, scarcely to myself. I was hot with sudden anger as I spoke. Her reply was cold.

"Do you want your father dead?"

"I want Drum dead!"

"You know Ogge Drum goes about day and night with bodyguards, men with swords and knives, crossbowmen. And his son Sebb has his gift, and Ren Corde serves him, and all his people are on the watch for anyone from Caspromant. Do you want Canoc to go striding in there and be killed?"

“No—”

“You don’t think he’d kill from behind—the way *he* did? Sneaking in the dark? You think Canoc would do that?”

“No,” I said, and put my head in my hands.

“My father says he’s been afraid for two years now that Canoc’s going to get on his horse and ride to Drummant to kill Ogge Drum. The way he rode to Dunet. Only alone.”

I had nothing to say. I knew why Canoc had not done so. For the sake of his people who needed his protection. For my sake.

After a long time, Gry said, “Maybe you can’t use your gift forward, only backward, but I can use mine forward.”

“You’re lucky.”

“I am,” she said. “Though my mother doesn’t think so.” She got up abruptly and said, “Coaly! Come for a walk.”

“What do you mean about your mother?”

“I mean she wants me to go back to Borremant with her for the winter hunts. And if I won’t go with her and learn to call to the hunt, she says then I’d better find myself a husband, and soon, because I can’t expect the people of Roddmant to support me if I won’t use my gift.”

“But—what does Ternoc say?”

“Father is troubled and worried and doesn’t want me to upset Mother and doesn’t understand why I don’t want to be a brantor.”

I could tell that Coaly was standing, patient, but ready for the promised walk. I got up too, and we went out into the drizzling, windless air.

“Why don’t you?” I asked.

“It’s all in the story about the ants. —Come on!” She set off into the rain. Coaly tugged me after her.

It was a disturbing conversation, which I only half understood. Gry was troubled, but I had no help for her, and her reference to finding a husband had brought me up short. Since my eyes had been sealed, we had said nothing of our pledge made on the rock above the waterfall. I could not hold her to it. But what need to? I could dismiss all that. We were fifteen, yes. But there was no need to rush into anything, no need even to talk about it. Our understanding was enough. In the Uplands, strategic betrothals may be made early, but people seldom marry till they are in

their twenties. I told myself that Parn had been merely threatening Gry. Yet I felt the threat hung over me as well.

What Gry had said about the gifts made some sense to me, but seemed mostly mere theory: except for her own gift, the calling. It went both forward and backward, she said. If by backward she meant calling wild beasts to be killed, forward meant working with domestic animals—horsebreaking, cattle calling, training dogs, curing and healing. Honoring trust, not betraying it. That was how she saw it. If she saw it so, Parn could not move her. Nothing could move her.

But it was true that training and horsebreaking were thought of as trades that anyone might learn. The gift of the lineage was calling to the hunt. Indeed she could not be a brantor at Roddmant or anywhere else, if she did not use that gift. If—as Parn saw it—she did not honor her gift, but betrayed it.

And I? By not using my gift, by refusing it, not trusting it—was I betraying it?

SO THE YEAR went on, a dark year, though now each day had that one bright hour at its dawn. It was early winter when the runaway man came to Caspromant.

He had a narrow escape, though he didn't know it, for he came onto our land from the west, down in the sheep pastures where we had met the adder, and Canoc was riding the fence there, as he rode our borders with Drummant and Cordemant whenever he could. He saw the fellow hop over the stone wall and come, as he said, sneaking up the hill. Canoc turned Branty and charged down on him like a falcon on a mouse. "I had my left hand out," he said. "I thought sure he was a sheep thief, or come after the Silver Cow. I don't know what stayed my hand."

Whatever it was, he didn't destroy Emmon then and there, but reined up and demanded who he was and what he was doing. Maybe he'd seen even in that flick of an eye that the man was not one of us, not a cattle thief from Drummant or a sheep thief from the Glens, but a foreigner.

And maybe when he heard how Emmon spoke, that soft Lowland accent, it softened his heart. In any case, he accepted the man's story, that he had

wandered up from Danner and was quite lost and was seeking nothing but a cottage where he might spend the night and some work if he could find it. The cold misty rain of December was coming over the hills, and the man had no proper coat, only a scanty jacket and a scarf that amounted to nothing.

Canoc led him to the farmhouse where the old woman and her son looked after the Silver Cow, and said if he liked he could come on up to the Stone House next day, where there might be a bit of work for him to do.

I have not told of the Silver Cow before. She was the single heifer who was left there when Drum's thieves took the other two. She had grown into the most beautiful cow in the Uplands. Alloc and my father brought her up to Roddmant to be bred to Ternoc's great white bull, and people all along the way admired her. In her first breeding, she dropped twin calves, a bull and a heifer, and in her second, twin heifers. The old woman and her son, mindful of their carelessness with her sisters, looked after her as if she were a princess, kept her close in, guarded her with their lives, curried her cream-white coat, fed her the best they had, and sang her praises to all who passed by. She had come to be called the Silver Cow, and the herd Canoc had dreamed of was well started, thanks to her and her sisters' calves. She thrived there where she was, and he took her back there; but as soon as her calves were weaned, he took them up to the high pastures, keeping the herd far from his dangerous borders.

The next day but one, the wanderer from the Lowlands arrived at our Stone House. Hearing Canoc greet him civilly, the people of the house took him in without question, fed him, found him an old cloak to keep warm in, and listened to him talk. Everybody was glad to have somebody new to listen to in winter.

"He talks like our dear Melle," Rab whispered, going teary. I didn't go teary, but I did like to hear his voice.

There was really no work at that time of year that needed an extra hand to do, but it was the tradition of the Uplands to take in the needy stranger and save his pride with at least the semblance of work—so long as he hadn't given any sign of belonging to a domain you were feuding with, in which case he'd probably be lying dead somewhere out on your borders. It was plain that Emmon knew absolutely nothing about horses, or sheep, or

cattle, or farm work of any kind; but anybody can clean harness. He was set to cleaning harness, and he did so, now and then. Saving his pride was not a great problem.

Mostly he sat with me, or with me and Gry, in the corner of the great hearth, while the women spinning over on the other side droned their long, soft songs. I have told how we talked, and what pleasure he brought to us, merely by being from a world where what troubled us so made no sense at all, and none of our grim questions need even be asked.

When we came to the matter of my blindfold, and I told him that my father had sealed my eyes, he was too cautious to ask any further. He knew a bog when he felt it quake, as they say in the Uplands. But he talked to the people of the household, and they told him how Young Orrec's eyes had been sealed because he had the wild gift that might destroy anything and anyone that came before him whether he willed it or not; and they went on and told him, I'm sure, about Blind Caddard, and how Canoc had raided Dunet, and maybe how my mother had died. All that must have tried his disbelief; and yet I can understand how it still could have seemed to him the superstition of ignorant country folk caught in their own fears, scaring themselves with talk of witchery.

Emmon was fond of Gry and me; he was sorry for us and knew how much we valued him for his company; I think he imagined that he could do us good—enlighten us. When he realised that although I'd said my father had sealed my eyes, it was I who kept them blindfolded, he was really shocked. "You do that to yourself?" he said. "But you're mad, Orrec. There's no harm in you. You wouldn't hurt a fly if you stared at it all day!"

He was a man and I a boy, he was a thief and I was honest, he had seen the world and I had not, but I knew evil better than he did. "There's harm in me," I said.

"Well, there's a little harm in the best of us, so best to let it out, admit it, not nurse it and keep it festering in the dark, eh?"

His advice was well meant, but it was both offensive and painful to me. Not wanting to give a harsh answer, I got up, spoke to Coaly, and went outdoors. As I left I heard Emmon say to Gry, "Ah, he could be his father just now!" What she said to him I don't know, but he never tried to advise me about my blindfold again.

Our safest and most fruitful subjects were horsebreaking and storytelling. Emmon didn't know much about horses, but had seen fine ones in the cities of the Lowlands, and he said he'd never seen any trained as ours were, even old Roanie and Greylag, let alone Star. When the weather wasn't too bad we went out, and Gry could show off all the tricks and paces she and Star had worked out together, which I knew only from her descriptions. I heard Emmon's shouts of praise and admiration, and tried to imagine Gry and the filly—but I had never seen the filly. I had never seen Gry as she was now.

Sometimes there was a tone in Emmon's voice as he spoke to Gry that caught my ear; a little added softness, propitiating, almost wheedling. Mostly he spoke to her as a man does to a girl, but sometimes he sounded like a man speaking to a woman.

It didn't get him far. She answered him as a girl, gruff and plain. She liked Emmon but she didn't think much of him.

When it rained and blew or the snow flurries swept over our hills, we stayed in the chimney corner. Running short of other matters to talk about, since Emmon was such a poor hand at telling us about life in the Lowlands, one day Gry asked me for a story. She liked the hero tales of the *Chamhan*, so I told one of the stories about Hamneda and his friend Omnan. Then, seduced by the eager listening of my audience—for the spinning women had stopped their singing, and some had even stopped their wheels to hear the tale—I went on and spoke a poem from the scriptures of the Temple of Raniu, which my mother had written down. There were gaps in it where her memory had failed, and I had filled them in with my own words, keeping to the complex meter. The language lifted up my heart whenever I read it, and as I spoke it, it possessed me, it sang through me. When I ended, I heard for the first time in my life that silence which is the performer's sweetest reward.

"By all the names," Emmon said in an awed voice.

There was a nice little murmur of admiration from the spinning women.

"How do you know that tale, that song?— Ah, of course, through your mother— But she told you all that? And you remember it?"

"She wrote it down for me," I said, without thinking.

"Wrote it? You can read?— But not with a blindfold on!"

"I can read, but not with a blindfold on."

“What a memory you must have!”

“Memory is a blind man’s eyes,” I said, with a certain malice, feeling that I was fencing and had best be on the offensive, having nearly dropped my guard.

“And she taught you to read?”

“Gry and me.”

“But what have you got to read, up here? I’ve never seen a book about.”

“She wrote out some for us.”

“By all the names. Listen, I have a book. It was . . . given me, down in the city. I hauled it about in my pack all this way, thinking there might be some value to it. Not up here, eh? But to you, maybe. Here, let me get the thing.” He soon returned, and put into my hands a small box, no deeper than a finger joint is long. The lid lifted easily. Under it, instead of a hollow space, I felt a surface like silk cloth. Under it were many more cloths, leaves, held at one edge, as in the book my mother had made, fine and thin yet delicately stiff, so that they turned easily. My fingers marveled to touch them. And my eyes yearned to see them, but I handed the book back to Emmon. “Read a little,” I said.

“Here, Gry, you read,” Emmon said promptly.

I heard Gry turning the leaves. She spelled out a few words, and gave up. “It looks so different from what Melle wrote,” she said. “It’s small, and black, and more straight up and down, and all the letters look alike.”

“It’s printed,” Emmon said knowledgeably, but when I wanted to know what that meant, he couldn’t tell me much. “The priests do it,” he said vaguely. “They have these wheels, like a wine press, you know . . .”

Gry described the book for me: the outside of it was leather, she said, probably calfskin, with a hard shiny finish, stamped round the edges with a scroll design in gold leaf, and on the back, where the leaves joined, was more gold leaf and a word stamped in red, and the edges of the leaves were gilt. “It’s very, very beautiful,” she said. “It must be a precious thing.”

And she gave it back to Emmon, as I knew by his saying, “No: it’s for you and Orrec. If you can read it, do. And if you can’t, maybe somebody will happen by someday who can, and they’ll think you great scholars, eh?” He laughed his merry laugh, and we thanked him, and he put the book back in my hands. I held it. It was indeed a precious thing.

In the earliest, greyest light of morning I saw it, the gold leaf, the red word *Transformations* on the spine; I opened it and saw the paper (which I still took for cloth of incredible fineness), the splendid, bold, large, curling letters of the title page, the small black print thick as ants crawling across every white leaf . . . Thick as ants. I saw the ant hill by the path above the Ashbrook, the ants crawling in and out about their business, and I struck at them with hand and eye and word and will, and still they crawled on about their business, and I closed my eyes. . . . I closed my eyes, and opened them. The book lay before me, open. I read a line: *So in his heart in silence he foreswore his vow*. It was poetry, a story in poetry. I turned the pages slowly back to the first one and began to read.

Coaly shifted position at my feet and looked up. I looked down at her. I saw a middle-sized dog with a close, curly, black coat that grew very short and fine on her ears and face, a long nose, a high forehead, clear, intent, dark-brown eyes looking straight up into mine.

In my excitement of anticipation, I had forgotten to put her out of the room before I took off the blindfold.

She stood up, without ceasing to look into my eyes. She was very much taken aback but far too dignified and responsible to show it in any way except by that intense, puzzled, honest stare.

“Coaly,” I said in a shaky voice, and put out my hand to her muzzle. She sniffed it. It was me all right.

I knelt down and hugged the dog. We did not go in much for displays of affection, but she pressed her forehead against my chest and kept it there a while.

I said, “Coaly, I will never hurt you.”

She knew that. She looked at the door, however, as if to tell me that though this was much pleasanter, she was willing to go and wait outside, since that was the custom.

I said, “Stay,” and she lay down beside the chair, and I went back to my book.

Chapter 16

EMMON LEFT soon after that. Though Canoc's hospitality would not permit any lapse in courtesy, it was clear that his welcome was wearing thin. And in fact life in the Stone House in late winter and early spring was thin, with the hens not laying, and the sausages and hams long since eaten, and no beef cattle to slaughter. We lived mostly on oat porridge and dried apples; our one meat and luxury was smoked or fresh trout or salmon-trout caught in the Spate or the Ashbrook. Having heard our talk of the great, wealthy domains of the Carrantages, Emmon maybe thought he'd eat better there. I hope he got there. I hope they did not use their gifts on him.

Before he left he talked seriously with Gry and me, as seriously as such a light-souled, light-fingered man could talk. He told us we should leave the Uplands. "What is there here for you?" he said. "Gry, you won't do as your mother wishes and bring the beasts to the hunters, so you're considered useless. Orrec, you keep that damned bandage on, so you *are* useless, for anything to be done on a farm like this. But if you went down into the Lowlands, Gry, with that mare of yours, and showed off her paces, you'd get a job with any horse breeder or stable you liked. And you, Orrec, the way you remember tales and songs, and the way you make tales and songs of your own, that's a skill of value in all the towns, and in the cities too. People gather to hear tellers and singers, and pay them well, and rich people keep them in their household, to show off with. And if you have to keep your eyes shut all your life, well, some of those poets and singers are blind men. Though if I were you, I'd open my eyes and see what I had within hand's reach." And he laughed.

And so he went off northward on a bright April day, waving a jaunty farewell no doubt, wearing a good warm coat Canoc had given him, and carrying his old pack, in which were a couple of silver spoons from our

cabinet, a brooch of jasper and river-gold which had been Rab's great treasure, and the one silver-mounted bridle from our stable gear.

"He never did clean it," Canoc said, but without much rancor. If you take in a thief, you expect to lose something. You don't know what you may gain.

While he was with us all those months, Gry and I had not talked as we used to, in complete frankness. There were matters we hadn't spoken of at all. It had been winter, a time of waiting, a suspension. Now all we had kept back burst out.

I said, "Gry, I've seen Coaly."

Coaly's tail thumped once at her name.

"I forgot to put her out. I looked down and she was there, and she saw me see her. So . . . since then . . . I haven't put her out."

Gry thought this over for a long time before she spoke. "So you think . . . it's safe . . . ?"

"I don't know what I think."

She was silent, pondering.

"I think that when I—when my gift went wrong, when it was out of my control—I'd been trying to use it, my power—trying and trying, and not able to. And it made me angry, and ashamed, and my father kept pushing me and pushing me, so I kept trying, and getting angrier and more ashamed, till it broke out and went wild. So, if I never try to use it, maybe . . . It might be all right."

Gry pondered this too. "But when you killed the adder— You hadn't been trying to use your gift then, had you?"

"Yes, I had. I worried all the time about it, about not having it. Anyhow, did I kill the adder? Listen, Gry, I've thought about that a thousand times. I struck at it and Alloc did and my father did, all almost at once. And Alloc thought it was me, because I did see it first. And my father—" I paused.

"He wanted it to be you?"

"Maybe."

After a while I said, "Maybe he wanted me to think it was me. To give me confidence. I don't know. But I told him, I said I did what I was supposed to do, but it didn't feel as if I did anything. And I tried to make him tell me what it was like when he used his power, but he couldn't. But listen, you must know it when the power goes through you! You must! I

know it when the power comes into me when I'm making a poem. I know what it's like! But if I do as Father taught me, if I try to use that power, use eye and hand and word and will, nothing happens, nothing! I've never felt it then!"

"Even . . . Even there, by the Ashbrook?"

I hesitated. "I don't know," I said. "I was so angry, with myself, with my father. It was strange. It was like being caught in a storm, in a gust of wind. I tried to strike and nothing happened, but then the wind struck, and I opened my eyes, and my hand was still pointing, and the hillside was all writhing and melting and turning black—and I thought Father was standing there in front of me, where I was pointing, that he was shrinking and shrivelling—but it was the tree. Father was standing behind me."

"The dog," Gry said after a while, in a whisper. "Hamneda."

"I was on Branty, and he spooked when Hamneda came running at him. All I know I did was try to keep on Branty and keep him from rearing. If I looked at the dog, I didn't know it. But Father was on Greylag. Behind me."

I suddenly fell silent.

I put my hands up to my eyes as if to cover them, though they were covered with the blindfold.

Gry said, "It could . . ." and stopped.

"It could have been Father. Every time."

"But . . ."

"I knew that. I knew it all along. But I didn't dare think it. I had to—I had to believe it was me. That I had the gift. That I did those things. That I killed the adder, that I killed the dog, that I can make Chaos. I had to believe it. I have to believe it so other people will believe it, so they'll be afraid of me and keep away from the borders of Caspromant! Isn't that the good of the gift? Isn't that what it's for? Isn't that what it does? Isn't that what a brantor does for his people?"

"Orrec," Gry said, and I stopped.

She asked, low-voiced, "What does Canoc believe?"

"I don't know."

"He believes you have the gift. The wild gift. Even if—"

But I broke in. "Does he? Or did he know it was himself, his gift, his power, and he was just using me, because I didn't have it, didn't have the

gift? I couldn't destroy anything, anybody. All I'm good for is being a bogey. A scarecrow. Better keep away from Caspromant! Keep away from Blind Orrec, he'll destroy everything he sees if he doesn't wear a blindfold! But I wouldn't. I don't, Gry. I don't destroy everything I see. I can't! I saw Mother. I saw her when she was dying. I saw her. I didn't hurt her. And the—books— And Coaly—" But I could not go on. The tears I had not cried all through the dark years caught up with me, and I put my head in my arms and wept.

With Coaly on one side of me, pressed against my leg, and Gry on the other, her arm round my shoulders, I cried it out.

♦

WE DID NOT TALK more that day. I was exhausted by my weeping fit. Gry bade me goodbye with a little soft kiss on my hair, and I told Coaly to take me to my room. When I was there, I felt the blindfold, hot and soaking wet, pressing on my eyes. I pulled it off, and the wet pads with it. It was an April afternoon, a golden light I had not seen for three years. I stared dumbly at the light. I lay down on my bed, and closed my eyes, and slipped back into the dark.

Gry came back the next day, about midday. I was standing blindfolded in the doorway letting Coaly have a run, when I heard Star's light hoofs on the stones.

We went back to the kitchen gardens and into the orchard, a good way from the house. We sat on the log of an old tree there that was waiting for the woodsman to saw it up.

"Orrec, do you think that . . . that you don't have the gift?"

"I know it."

"Then I want to ask you to look at me," Gry said.

It took me a long time to do it, but I lifted my hands at last and untied the blindfold. I looked down at my hands. The light dazzled me for a while. The ground was full of lights and shadows. Everything was bright, moving, shining. I looked up at Gry.

She was tall, with a thin, long, brown face, a wide, thin mouth, and dark eyes under arched eyebrows. The whites of her eyes were very clear. Her hair was shining black, falling loose and heavy. I put out my hands to her,

and she took them. I put my face down into her hands. “You are beautiful,” I whispered into her hands.

She leaned forward to kiss my hair, and sat up straight again, serious, stern, and tender.

“Orrec,” she said, “what are we going to do?”

I said, “I’m going to look at you for a year. Then I’m going to marry you.”

She was startled; her head went back and she laughed. “All right!” she said. “All right! But now?”

“What about now?”

“What do we do? If I won’t use my gift, and you . . .”

“Have none to use.”

“Then who are we now?”

That I could not answer so easily.

“I have to talk to Father,” I said at last.

“Wait a little. My father rode over with me today to see him. Mother came home yesterday from the Glens. She says that Ogge Drum and his older son have made peace with each other, and the younger son’s the one he’s quarreling with now. And the rumor is that Ogge’s planning a foray, maybe to Roddmant or maybe to Caspromant—to get back the white cows that he says Canoc stole from him three years ago. That means, to raid our herd, or yours. Father and I met Alloc, coming. They’re all in your north fields now, planning what to do.”

“And how do I come into their plans?”

“I don’t know.”

“What’s the good of a scarecrow that doesn’t scare the crows?”

But her news, bad as it was, could not darken my heart, not while I could see her, and see the sunlight on the sparse flowers of the old, split-trunked apple trees, and the far brown slopes of the mountain.

“I have to talk to him,” I repeated. “Until then, can we go walking?”

We stood up. Coaly stood up and stood with her head a little on one side and a concerned look, asking, “And how do I come into your plans?”

“You walk with us, Coaly,” I told her, unhooking her leash. So we walked on up into the glen, along the little rushing stream, and every step was a joy and a delight.

Gry left in time to be back at Roddmant by dark. Canoc did not come home till after dark. Often, when he was out late like this, he stopped at one farmhouse or another of the domain, where they welcomed him and pressed him to eat and talked over the work and worries of the farming with him. I had used to do that sometimes with him, before my eyes were sealed. But these last years, he had gone out always earlier and come home always later, riding farther and working harder than ever, taking too much on himself, wearing himself out. I knew he would be tired, and that after hearing about Ogge Drum he would be in a grimmer mood than ever. But my own mood had turned reckless at last.

Canoc came in and went upstairs without my knowing it, while I was in my room. I had lighted a fire in the hearth, for the evening had turned cold. From it I lighted a candle stolen from the kitchen at my hearth fire, and sat defiantly reading the *Transformations* of Denios.

Realising the household had gone silent and the women had probably left the kitchen, I pulled on my blindfold and asked Coaly to take me to the tower room.

What the poor dog thought of me being blind one moment and seeing the next I don't know, but being a dog she asked only questions that needed a practical answer.

I knocked at the door of the tower room, and getting no reply, I pulled off my blindfold and looked in. An oil lamp on the mantel gave a tiny, smoky light. The hearth was dark and smelled sour, as if it had not been lit for a long time. The room was cold and desolate. Canoc lay fast asleep on the bed, on his back, in his shirtsleeves, having thrown himself down and not moved since. All he had for a blanket was my mother's brown shawl. He had pulled it up across himself, and his hand was clenched in the fringe, on his chest. I felt that pinch at my heart that I had felt when I found the shawl across the footboard. But I could not afford to pity him now. I had a score to settle and no courage to spare.

"Father," I said, and then his name, "Canoc!"

He roused, sat up leaning on his elbow, shaded his eyes from the lamp, stared vaguely at me. "Orrec?"

I came forward so he could see me clearly.

He was nearly stunned with weariness and sleep, and had to blink and rub his eyes and bite his lip to come alive; then he looked up again and

said, wonderingly, “Where’s your blindfold?”

“I won’t hurt you, Father.”

“I never thought you would,” he said, a little more strongly, though still in that wondering tone.

“You never thought I would? You never were afraid of my wild gift, then?”

He sat up on the side of the bed. He shook his head and rubbed his hair. Finally he looked up at me again. “What is it, Orrec?”

“What it is, Father, is I never had the wild gift. Did I? I never had any gift at all. I never killed that snake, or the dog, or any of it. It was you.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying you tricked me into believing I had the gift and couldn’t control it, so that you could use me. So you wouldn’t have to be ashamed of me because I have no gift, because I shame your lineage, because I’m a calluc’s son!”

He was on his feet then, but he said nothing, staring at me in bewilderment.

“If I had the gift, don’t you think I’d use it now? Don’t you think I’d show you the great things I can do, the things I can kill? But I don’t have it. You didn’t give it to me. All you gave me, all you ever gave me, was three years of blindness!”

“A calluc’s son?” he whispered, incredulous.

“Do you think I didn’t love her? But you didn’t let me see her—that whole year—only once—while she was dying—Because you had to keep up your lie, your trick, your cheat!”

“I never lied to you,” he said. “I thought—” He stopped. He was still too surprised, too appalled, for anger.

“There at the Ashbrook—you believe I did that?”

“Yes,” he said. “I have no power such as that.”

“You do! You know it! You drew that line through the ash grove. You destroyed men at Dunet. You have the gift, you have the gift of unmaking! I don’t. I never did. You tricked me. Maybe you tricked yourself because you couldn’t stand it that your son wasn’t what you wanted. I don’t know. I don’t care. I know you can’t use me any longer. My eyes or my blindness. They’re not yours, they’re mine. I won’t let your lies cheat me any more. I

won’t let your shame shame me any more. Find yourself another son, since this one’s not good enough.”

“Orrec,” he said, like a man hit in the wind.

“Here,” I said, and tossed the blindfold onto the floor in front of him. I slammed the door, and ran down the turning stairs. Utterly bewildered, Coaly chased after me, barking her sharp, warning bark. She caught up with me at the foot of the staircase and took the hem of my kilt in her teeth. I put my hand on her back and worked it in the soft fur to calm her. She growled once. She came along with me back to my room. When we got there and I shut the door, she lay down in front of it. I don’t know whether she was guarding me from whoever might enter, or preventing me from going out again.

I built up the fire a little, relighted my candle, and sat down at the table. The book lay open, the book of the great poet, the treasure of joy and solace. But I could not read it. I had my eyes back, but what was I to do with them? What good were they, what good was I? *Who are we now?* Gry had asked. If I was not my father’s son, who was I?

Chapter 17

EARLY IN the morning I left my room and went into the hall without the blindfold. As I had dreaded they would do, the women cried out and ran from me. Rab did not run away, but stood her ground, saying in a trembling voice, “Orrec, you’ll frighten the girls in the kitchen.”

“There’s nothing to be frightened of,” I said. “What are you afraid of? I can’t hurt you. Are you afraid of Alloc? He has more of the gift than I do! Tell them all to quiet down and come back.”

Just then Canoc came down the tower stair. He looked at us both with bleak eyes.

“He said you needn’t fear him, Rab,” he said. “You must trust his word, as I do.” He spoke laboriously. “Orrec, I was not able to say this to you last night. Ternoc thinks his white herd is in danger from Drummant. I’ll be going there today to ride his borders with him.”

“I can come,” I said.

He stood irresolute, and then with the same bleak look, “As you will.”

They gave us bread and cheese in the kitchen, and we stuffed it in our pockets to eat as we went. I had no weapon but Blind Caddard’s staff, an unhandy thing to carry on horseback. Canoc tossed me his long hunting dagger, and I hung the staff up in the front hall, where it used to hang, as we went out. He saddled Branty and I Greylag, for Roanie had been out to grass in the home paddock since March. Alloc met us in the courtyard; my father had asked him to stay close to the house, keep watch, and gather all the men he could to aid him in case of an attack. He stared at me but looked hurriedly away and asked nothing about my blindfold.

Canoc and I set out at a good pace to Roddmant, or as good a pace as old Greylag could keep. We said nothing all the way.

I exulted in the powers given back to me. What joy, to sit a horse without fear of falling, to see the bright world swing by at the canter, to

wipe from my eyes the tears the wind brought to them. To be riding to guard a friend's domain, riding, maybe, into danger, like a man. To be riding beside a man I knew to be brave, as brave as a man can be, whatever else he was. He sat upright and easy on the beautiful red horse, looking straight ahead.

We rode down to the southwest border of Roddmant, meeting Ternoc near the border of our domains. He had been there since before daylight. Last night a farmer's boy had brought him word, passed from one serf or farmer to the next, that a party of horsemen was coming through Geremant in our direction, along what they called the forest path.

He, and the men with him, looked at me, and like Alloc, asked no question. No doubt they thought or hoped I had learned to use my gift.

"Maybe old Erroy will see the Drums trespassing and twist 'em into corkscrews," said Ternoc with heavy humor. Canoc did not answer. Alert yet distant, as if some vision occupied him, he spoke only to confirm Ternoc's directions.

There were eight of us in all, and four more men were hoped for from our border farms. Ternoc's plan was that we should spread out no farther than hailing distance and keep watch. At the points likeliest for Drum's men to enter, Ternoc and Canoc would stand guard. Those of us who had for arms only a knife or a boar lance would flank them, and our two men with longbows took the end stations.

So we spread out over the grassy, boggy hollows and little hillocks along the edge of the straggling woods. I had one of Ternoc's farmers on my left and Canoc on my right. We were to keep one another in sight, which was easy for me, since I was on one of the hillocks and had a good view to both sides and into the woods. Often I could see Ternoc, too, on the rising ground beyond Canoc. The sun was well up now, though the day was grey and cold. A spatter of rain ran across the hills every now and then. I got off Greylag to let him rest and graze, and stood watching south, west, north. Watching! using my eyes! being of use, not a useless lump in a blindfold led about by a girl and a dog! What if I had no gift? I had my eyesight, and my anger, and a knife.

The hours went on. I ate the last of my bread and cheese, and wished I had brought twice as much. Three times as much.

The hours went on, and I felt sleepy and foolish, standing on a hill by an old horse, waiting for nothing.

The hours went on. The sun was halfway down to the hills. I walked to and fro reciting what I could remember of the opening stanzas of the *Transformations*, and religious poems my mother had copied out, and wishing I had anything, anything to eat.

The little black-coated figure down in the bottomland to my left, the farmer, had sat down on a tussock of grass and his horse was grazing. The little black-coated figure down at the wood's edge to my right, my father, was on his tall red horse, walking him up and down, into the wood and out of it. I saw some other little figures move towards him among the trees, people on foot. I stared at them and blinked and shouted out at the top of my voice, "Canoc! Ahead of you!"

I ran to Greylag, startling him so he shied away at first and I couldn't get hold of the reins. I swung up on him awkwardly and headed him down the hill, kicking him into a run.

I had lost sight of Canoc, of the men I had seen—had I seen them? Greylag slipped and stumbled down the hill, which was too steep for him. When we got onto level ground at last, it was bog and mire, and I could see no one ahead of me. I urged the horse towards the trees, and we got onto drier ground at last. I had just realised that Greylag was lame in the left foreleg when there was a man in front of me among the trees. He had a crossbow and was cranking it, looking to my right. I rode straight at him yelling. The old stallion, not trained for battle, swerved to avoid him, but clumsily, knocking him down with a hind hoof, galloping on into the trees. We passed something on the ground, a man ruined, split open like a melon. We passed another man lying like a heap of rubbish in a black coat. Greylag ran limping out of the woods into the clear again.

I saw my father not far before me. He was swinging Branty around to face the woods again. He held his left hand out and high, and his face was alight with rage and joy. Then his expression changed, and he looked towards me for a moment, whether he saw me or not I do not know; and he bowed forward and slipped from the saddle, sideways and forward. I thought he meant to do this, and did not understand why. Branty stood, as he had been trained. I heard somebody shouting, behind me and to the left,

but I was riding to my father. I slid off Greylag and ran to him. He lay near his horse on the boggy grass, a crossbow bolt between his shoulder blades.

Ternoc was there, and others of his men, and one of our people, all coming around us, shouting and talking. Some of them ran off into the woods. Ternoc knelt beside me. He lifted up my father's head a little and said, "Oh, Canoc, Canoc man, oh no you won't do that, no."

I said, "Is Ogge dead?"

"I don't know," Ternoc said, "I don't know." He looked around. "Get somebody to help us here," he said.

The men were still shouting. "It's him, it's him," one of them yelled, running to us. Branty neighed and reared, protesting all this confusion. "The adder, the fat adder, he's burst open, dead, unmade! And his bastard cattle-thief son beside him!"

I got up and went over to Greylag. He stood lame, his weight off the left foreleg. I walked him over to Branty so that I could hold both horses.

"Can we put him on the colt?" I said.

Ternoc looked up at me, still bewildered.

"I want to carry him home," I said. "Can we put him on the colt?"

There was more shouting, and more men coming and going and running, before at last a plank was brought that had served as a footbridge over a brook. They laid Canoc on that, and so carried him up the long hills to Roddmant. They could lay him on his back, for the bolt had gone right through his breast and stood out a foot in front. I walked beside him. His face was calm and steady, and I did not want to close his eyes.

Chapter 18

THE GRAVEYARD of Caspromant is on a hillside south of the Stone House, looking towards the brown slopes of Mount Airn. We buried Canoc there close beside Melle. I put her brown shawl around him before we laid him down. It was not Parn but Gry who led the lament for him.

Mismanaged, like the boar hunt, Ogge's foray had split into two groups; one went astray in Geremant and came out on our borders, where they did nothing but set a barn afire; our farmers drove them off. Ogge and Harba had stayed on the forest path, ten men with them, five of them bowmen. Canoc destroyed Ogge and his son and one of the bowmen. The rest escaped. A farmer's son of Roddmant pursued them too far into the woods, where they turned on him; he wounded one with his boar lance before they brought him down. So the foray ended with five deaths.

After a time word came from Drummant that Denno and her son Sebb wanted an end to the feud, asking Caspromant to send them a white bull calf, as Canoc had promised, in sign of agreement. They sent with their messenger a fine roan colt. I rode with the group that took the white calf to Drummant.

It was strange to see the rooms I had been in but never seen, the faces I had known only as voices. But nothing moved me much at that time. I did our business there and returned.

I gave the roan colt to Alloc. I rode Branty now, for in that rush down the hill Greylag had strained his leg past repair, and he was out to grass now in the home paddock with Roanie. I went out to them every day or so with a panful of oats. They were glad to be together, and I often found them standing as horses do, close side by side, nose to flank, their tails twitching the May flies away. I liked to see them so.

Coaly ran with me whether I was afoot or on horseback, set free of her leash.

After a death it is the custom in the Uplands for there to be no selling or division of property, no marriages, no great undertakings or changes made, for a half year. Things go on as they were, as nearly as can be, throughout that time, and after that whatever settlements must be made are made. It is not a bad custom. In the matter of making peace with Drummant I had to act; otherwise I did not.

Alloc took my father's place in overseeing the domain, and I took Alloc's place as his assistant. He did not see it so; he thought he was assisting the brantor's son. But he was the one who knew what had to be done and how to do it. I had done nothing for three years, and had been a child before that. Alloc knew the people, the land, the animals. I did not.

Gry did not ride to Caspromant now. I rode to Roddmant two or three times a halfmonth and sat with her and Ternoc, and Parn if she was there. Ternoc would greet me each time with a close, hard embrace, calling me son. He had loved and admired Canoc and grieved for him sorely and tried to put me in his place. Parn was restless and sparing with words as ever. Gry and I seldom spoke to each other alone; she was gentle and taciturn. Now and then we rode out, she on Star and I on Branty, and let our young horses have a run on the hills.

It was a fine summer and a good harvest. Come mid-October the crops were in. I rode to Roddmant and asked if Gry would ride with me. She came out and saddled up her pretty, dancing mare, and we rode up the glen in the golden sunlight.

At the waterfall pool, we let the horses graze on the banks where the grass was still lush and green. We sat on the rocks by the water in the sunlight. The branches of black willows nodded and nodded in the wind of the falling water. The three-note bird was silent.

"It's soon to marry, Gry," I said. "But I don't see what else we can do."

"No," said she, agreeing.

"Do you want to stay here?"

"At Roddmant?"

"Or Caspromant."

After a time she said, "Where else?"

"Well, what I thought is this. There is no brantor of Caspromant. Alloc is the man to manage the domain. He might join it to Roddmant and come under your father's protection. I think that would suit them both. Alloc's to

marry Rab next month. They should have the Stone House at Caspromant. Maybe they'll have a son with the gift . . ."

"If the domains were joined, you could live here with us," Gry said.

"I could."

"Do you want to?"

"Do you want me to?"

She was silent.

"What would we do here?"

"What we do now," she said, after a while.

"Would you be willing to go away?"

It was harder to say aloud than I had expected. It sounded stranger, spoken, than it did thought.

"Away?"

"Into the Lowlands."

She said nothing. She looked out over the dappled, shining water of the pool, looking far past it.

"Emmon took the spoons, but maybe he spoke the truth. What we can do is useless here, but down there, maybe . . ."

"What we can do," she repeated.

"We each have a gift, Gry."

She glanced at me. She nodded, a deep, slow nod.

"It may be that I also have a grandfather or grandmother in the city of Derris Water."

She stared at me with wide eyes then. That had never entered her head. She laughed with surprise. "Why, you do! And you'd walk in, out of the blue, and say, 'Here I am, your grandson the witch!' Oh, Orrec. How strange that is!"

"They might find it so." I took out the little opal that I wore on its chain round my neck and showed it to her. "I have this, though. And all she told me . . . I'd like to go there."

"Would you?" Her eyes had begun to shine. She thought for a while and said, "You think we could make a living? The way Emmon said? We'd have to."

"Well, we could try."

"If we couldn't, we'd be among strangers, strange people."

That is a great fear among Uplanders: to be among strangers. But where is it not?

“You’ll train their colts, I’ll tell them poetry. If we don’t like them, we can move on. If we don’t like them at all, we can come back home.”

“We might go as far as the ocean shore,” Gry said, looking now very far away through the sunlight and the nodding willows. Then she whistled three notes; and the bird answered.

♦

IT WAS IN APRIL that we left, and I will leave our story there, on the south road down through the hills, a young man on a tall red horse, and a young woman on a bright bay mare, and a black dog running before them, and following peacefully along behind them the most beautiful cow in the world. For that was the wedding gift of my domain to me, the Silver Cow. Not a very practical one, it seemed, until Parn reminded us that we would need money and could sell her for a good price in Dunet, where they might still remember the white cattle of Caspromant. “Maybe they’ll remember what they gave Canoc, too,” I said, and Gry said, “Then they’ll know you’re the gift’s gift.”

VOICES

Caspro's Hymn

As in the dark of winter night
Our eyes seek dawn,
As in the bonds of bitter cold
The heart craves sun,
So blinded and so bound, the soul
Cries out to thee:
Be our light, our fire, our life,
    Liberty!

Chapter 1

THE FIRST thing I can remember clearly is writing the way into the secret room.

I am so small I have to reach my arm up to make the signs in the right place on the wall of the corridor. The wall is coated with thick grey plaster, cracked and crumbling in places so the stone shows through. It's almost dark in the corridor. It smells of earth and age, and it's silent. But I'm not afraid; I'm never afraid there. I reach up and move my writing finger in the motions I know, in the right place, in the air, not quite touching the surface of the plaster. The door opens in the wall, and I go in.

The light in that room is clear and calm, falling from many small skylights of thick glass in the high ceiling. It's a very long room, with shelves down its wall, and books on the shelves. It's my room, and I've always known it. Ista and Sosta and Gudit don't. They don't even know it's there. They never come to these corridors far in the back of the house. I pass the Waylord's door to come here, but he's sick and lame and stays in his rooms. The secret room is my secret, the place where I can be alone, and not scolded and bothered, and not afraid.

The memory isn't of one time I went there, but many. I remember how big the reading table looked to me then, and how high the bookshelves were. I liked to get under the table and build a kind of wall or shelter with some of the books. I pretended to be a bear cub in its den. I felt safe there. I always put the books back exactly where they belonged on the shelves; that was important. I stayed in the lighter part of the room, near the door that's not a door. I didn't like the farther end, where it grows dark and the ceiling comes down lower. In my mind I called that the shadow end, and I almost always stayed away from it. But even my fear of the shadow end was part of my secret, my kingdom of solitude. And it was mine alone, until one day when I was nine.

Sosta had been scolding me for some stupid thing that wasn't my fault, and when I was rude back to her she called me "sheep hair," which put me in a fury. I couldn't hit her because her arms were longer and she could hold me off, so I bit her hand. Then her mother, my bymother Ista, scolded me and cuffed me. Furious, I ran to the back part of the house, to the dark corridor, and opened the door and went into the secret room. I was going to stay there till Ista and Sosta thought I'd run away and been taken as a slave and was gone forever, and then they'd be sorry for scolding unjustly and cuffing and calling me names. I rushed into the secret room all hot and full of tears and rage—and there, in the strange clear light of that place, stood the Waylord with a book in his hands.

He was startled, too. He came at me, fierce, his arm raised as if to strike. I stood like a stone. I could not breathe.

He stopped short. "Memer! How did you come here?"

He looked at the place where the door is when it's open, but of course nothing was there but the wall.

I still couldn't breathe or speak.

"I left it open," he said, without believing what he said.

I shook my head.

Finally I was able to whisper, "I know how."

His face was shocked and amazed, but after a while it changed, and he said, "Decalo."

I nodded.

My mother's name was Decalo Galva.

I want to tell of her, but I can't remember her. Or I do but the memory won't go into words. Being held tight, jostling, a good smell in the darkness of the bed, a rough red cloth, a voice which I can't hear but it's only just out of hearing. I used to think if I could hold still and listen hard enough, I'd hear her voice.

She was a Galva by blood and by house. She was head housekeeper for Sulter Galva, Waylord of Ansul, an honorable and responsible position. In Ansul there were no serfs or slaves then; we were citizens, householders, free people. My mother Decalo was in charge of all the people who worked in Galvamand. My bymother Ista, the cook, liked to tell us about how big the household used to be, back then, how many people Decalo had to look after. Ista herself had two kitchen assistants every day, and three helpers

for the big dinners for visiting notables; there were four housecleaners, and the handyman, and a groom and stableboy for the horses, eight horses in the stable, some to ride and some to drive. There were quite a few relatives and old people living in the house. Ista's mother lived up over the kitchens, the Waylord's mother lived in the Master's rooms upstairs. The Waylord himself was always travelling up and down the Ansul Coast from town to town to meet with the other waylords, sometimes in the saddle, sometimes in a carriage with a retinue. There was a smithy in the west court in those days, and the driver and postboy lived on the top floor of the carriage house, always ready to go out with the Waylord on his rounds. "Oh it was all busy and abustle," Ista says. "The old days! The good days!"

When I ran through the silent corridors past the ruined rooms, I used to try to imagine those days, the good days. I used to pretend, when I swept the doorways, that I was making ready for guests who'd come through them wearing fine clothes and shoes. I used to go up to the Master's rooms and imagine how they'd looked clean and warm and furnished. I'd kneel in the windowseat there to look out through the clear, small-paned window over the roofs of the city to the mountain.

The name of my city and all the coast north of it, Ansul, means "Looking at Sul"—the great mountain, last and highest of the five peaks of Manva, the land across the straits. From the seafront and from all the western windows of the city you can see white Sul above the water, and the clouds it gathers round it as if they were its dreams.

I knew the city had been called Ansul the Wise and Beautiful for its university and library, its towers and arcaded courts, its canals and arched bridges and the thousand little marble temples of the street-gods. But the Ansul of my childhood was a broken city of ruins, hunger, and fear.

Ansul was a protectorate of Sundraman, but that great nation was busy fighting over its border with Loaman and kept no troops here to defend us. Though rich in goods and farmland, Ansul had long fought no wars. Our well-armed merchant fleet kept pirates from the south from harrying the coast, and since Sundraman enforced an alliance with us long ago, we had had no enemies by land. So when an army of Alds, the people of the deserts of Asudar, invaded us, they swept over the hills of Ansul like wildfire. Their army broke into the city and went through the streets murdering, looting, and raping. My mother Decalo, caught in the street

coming from the market, was taken by soldiers and raped. Then the soldiers who had her were attacked by citizens, and in the fighting she managed to get away and get home to Galvamand.

The people of my city fought the invaders street by street and drove them out. The army camped outside the walls. For a year Ansul was besieged. I was born in that year of the siege. Then another, greater army came out of the eastern deserts, assaulted the city, and conquered it.

Priests led the soldiers to this house, which they called the Demon House. They took the Waylord away as a prisoner. They killed any people of the household who resisted them, and the old people. Ista managed to get away and hide at a neighbor's house with her mother and daughter, but the Waylord's mother was killed and her body thrown into the canal. Younger women were taken as slaves for the soldiers to use. My mother escaped by hiding with me in the secret room.

I am writing this story in that room.

I don't know how long she hid here. She must have had some food with her, and there's water here. The Alds ransacked the house, looting, burning what would burn. Soldiers and priests kept coming back day after day, wrecking the rooms, looking for books or loot or demonry. She had to come out at last. She crept out at night, and found refuge with other women in the basements of Cammand. And she kept herself and me alive, I don't know where or how, until the Alds ceased looting and wrecking and settled down as masters of the city. Then she came back to her house, to Galvamand.

All the wooden outbuildings had been burned, the furnishings broken or stolen, even the wooden floors torn out in places; but the main part of the house is stone with tile roofs, and it was not much harmed. Though Galvamand is the greatest house in the city, no Ald would live in it, considering it to be full of demons and evil spirits. Little by little Decalo put things in order again as well as she could. Ista came back from hiding, with her daughter Sosta, and the old hunchback handyman Gudit turned up. This was their household, and they were loyal to it and to one another. Their gods were here, their ancestors who gave them their dreams were here, their blessing was here.

After a year had passed the Waylord was released from the Gand's prison. The Alds put him out into the street naked. He could not walk,

because their torture had broken his legs. He tried to crawl down Galva Street from the Council House to Galvamand. People of the city helped him, carried him here, carried him home. And there were people of his household to care for him.

They were very poor. Every citizen of Ansul was poor, stripped bare by the Alds. They lived somehow, and under my mother's care the Waylord began to regain his strength. But in the cold and hunger of the third winter after the siege, Decalo took ill of a fever, and there was no medicine to cure it. So she died.

Ista declared herself my bymother and looked after my needs. She has heavy hands and a hot temper, but she loved my mother and did her best for me. I learned early to help with the work of the house and liked it well enough. In those years the Waylord was ill much of the time, in pain from the broken limbs and the tortures which had crippled him, and I was proud to be able to wait on him. Even when I was a very young child he'd rather have me wait on him than Sosta, who hated any kind of work, and spilled things.

I knew it was because of the secret room that I was alive, for it had saved me and my mother from the enemy. She must have told me that, and she must have shown me the way to open the door; or I saw her do it and remembered. That's how it seemed to me: I could see the shapes of the letters being written on the air, though I couldn't see the hand that wrote them. My hand followed those shapes, and so I would open the door, and come here, where I thought only I ever came.

Until that day when I faced the Waylord, and we stood staring at each other, he with his fist raised to strike.

He lowered his arm.

"You've been here before?" he asked.

I was quite terrified. I managed a nod.

He wasn't angry—he had raised his arm to strike an intruder, an enemy, not me. He'd never shown me anger or impatience, even when he was in pain and I was clumsy and stupid. I trusted him utterly and had never been afraid of him before, but I did hold him in awe. And at this moment he was fierce. His eyes had a fire in them as they did when he spoke the Praise of Sampa the Destroyer. They were dark, but that fire would come into them like the smoulder of opal in dark rock. He stared at me.

“Does anybody know you come here?”

Shake head.

“Have you ever spoken of this room?”

Shake head.

“Do you know you must never speak of this room?”

Nod.

He waited.

I saw that I had to say it aloud. I took a breath and said, “I will never speak of this room. Witness my vow all you gods of this house, and you gods of this city, and my mother’s soul and all souls who have dwelt in the House of the Oracle.”

At that he looked startled again. After a moment he came forward and reached out to touch my lips with his fingers. “I bear witness that this vow was made with a true heart,” he said, and turned to touch his fingers to the threshold of the little god-niche between the shelves of books. So I did the same. Then he put his hand lightly on my shoulder, looking down at me. “Where did you learn such a vow?”

“I made it up,” I said. “For when I swear that I will always hate the Alds, and I will drive them out of Ansul, and kill them all if I can.”

When I had told him that, my own most secret vow, my heart’s wish and promise that I had never told to anyone, I burst into tears—not fury tears, but sudden, huge, awful sobs that seemed to pick me up and shake me to pieces.

The Waylord got down somehow on his broken knees so that he could put his arms around me. I wept against his chest. He said nothing, but held me in a strong embrace until at last I could stop sobbing.

I was so tired and ashamed then that I turned away and sat on the floor with my face hidden against my knees.

I heard him haul himself up and go limping down towards the shadow end of the room. He came back with his handkerchief wet with water from the spring that runs there in the darkness. He put the wet cloth in my hand, and I held it to my hot blubbery face. It was lovely and cool. I held it against my eyes for a while and then scrubbed my face with it.

“I’m very sorry, Waylord,” I said. I was ashamed to have troubled him with my being there and my tears. I loved and honored him with all my

heart and wanted to show my love by helping and serving him, not by worrying and disturbing him.

“There’s a good deal to weep about, Memer,” he said in his quiet voice. Looking at him then I saw that he had cried, too, when I did. Tears change people’s eyes and mouth. I was abashed to see that I had made him weep, and yet it eased my shame, somehow.

After a while he said, “This is a good place for it.”

“Mostly I don’t cry, here,” I said.

“Mostly you don’t cry,” he said.

I was proud he’d noticed that.

“What do you do in this room?” he asked.

It was hard to answer. “I just come when I can’t bear things,” I said. “And I like to look at the books. Is it all right if I look at them? If I look inside them?”

He answered gravely, after a pause, “Yes. What do you find in them?”

“I look for the things I do to make the door open.”

I didn’t know the word “letters.”

“Show me,” he said.

I could have drawn the shapes in the air with my finger as I did when I opened the door, but instead I got up and took the big dark-brown leather-bound book from the bottom shelf, the book I called the Bear. I opened it to the first page with words on it. (I think I did know they were words, but maybe not.) I pointed to the shapes that were the same as the ones that opened the door.

“This one, and this one,” I said, whispering. I had laid the book on the table, very carefully, as I always did with the books when I looked inside them. He stood beside me and watched me point at the letters I recognised, though I didn’t know their names or how they sounded.

“What are they, Memer?”

“Writing.”

“So it’s writing that opens the door?”

“I think so. Only for the door you do it in the air, in the special place.”

“Do you know what the words are?”

I didn’t entirely understand what he was asking. I don’t think I knew then that the words in writing are the same as the words in speaking, that

writing and speaking are different ways of doing the same thing. I shook my head.

“What do you do with a book?” he asked.

I said nothing. I didn’t know.

“You read it,” he said, and this time he smiled as he spoke, his face lighting up as I had seldom seen it.

Ista was always telling me how happy and hospitable and genial the Waylord was in the old days, how merry his guests in the great dining room used to be, and how he had laughed at Sosta’s baby tricks. But my Waylord was a man whose knees had been broken with iron bars, his arms dislocated, his family murdered, his people defeated, a man in poverty and pain and shame.

“I don’t know how to read,” I said. And then, because his smile was fading fast, going back into the shadow, I said, “Can I learn?”

It saved the smile for a moment. Then he looked away.

“It’s dangerous, Memer,” he said, not speaking to me as to a child.

“Because the Alds are afraid of it,” I said.

He looked back at me. “They are. They ought to be.”

“It’s not demons or black magic,” I said. “There isn’t any such thing.”

He did not answer directly. He looked me in the eyes, not like a man of forty looking at a child of nine, but as one soul judging another soul.

“I’ll teach you, if you like,” he said.

Chapter 2

SO THE Waylord began to teach me, and I learned to read very quickly, as if I had been waiting and more than ready, like a starving person given dinner.

As soon as I understood what the letters were, I learned them, and began to make out the words, and I don't remember ever being puzzled or stopped for long, except once. I took down the tall red book with gold designs on its cover, which had always been a favorite of mine before I could read, when I called it Shining Red. I just wanted to find out what it was about, to taste it. But when I tried to read it, it made no sense. There were the letters, and they made words, but meaningless words. I could not understand a single one. It was nonsense, garble, garbage. I was furious with it and with myself when the Waylord came in. "What is wrong with this stupid book!" I said.

He looked at it. "Nothing's wrong with it. It's a very beautiful book." And he read some of the garble out loud. It did sound beautiful, and as if it meant something. I scowled. "It's in Aritan," he said, "the language spoken in the world a long time ago. Our language grew out of it. Some of the words aren't much changed. See, here? and here?" And I recognised parts of the words he pointed to.

"Can I learn it?" I asked.

He looked at me the way he often did, slowly: patient, judging, approving. "Yes," he said.

So I began to learn the ancient language, at the same time as I began to read the *Chamhan* in our own language.

We couldn't take books out of the secret room, of course. They would endanger us and everyone in Galvamand. The redhat priests of the Alds would come with soldiers to a house where a book was found. They wouldn't touch the book, because it was demonic, but they'd have slaves

take it down to the canal or the sea, bind stones to it to weight it, and throw it in to sink. And they'd do the same with the people who had owned it. They didn't burn books or people who read them. The god of the Alds is Atth, the Burning God, and death by fire is a grand thing to them. So they drowned books and people, or took them to the mudflats by the sea and pushed them in with shovels and poles and trampled them down until they suffocated, sunk in the deep wet mud.

People often brought books to Galvamand, at night, in secret. None of them knew of the hidden room—people who'd lived in the house all their life didn't know of it—but people even outside the city knew that the Waylord Sulter Galva was the man to bring books to, now that it was dangerous to own them, and the House of the Oracle was the place to keep them safe.

None of us in the household ever entered the Waylord's rooms without knocking and waiting for his answer, and since he was no longer so ill, if he didn't answer we didn't bother him. What he did with his time and where he spent it, Ista and Sosta never inquired. They thought he was always in his apartments or the inner courtyards, I suppose, as I used to think. Galvamand is so big it's easy to lose people in it. He never left the house, being too lame to walk even a block's length, but people came to see him, many people. They'd spend hours talking with him in the back gallery or, in summer, in one of the courts. They'd come and leave quietly, any time of the day or night, attracting no notice, using the ways through the back part of the house where nobody lived and the rooms were empty and in ruin.

When he had daytime visitors, I'd serve water, or tea when we had any, and sometimes I could stay with them and listen. Some were people I'd known all my life: Desac the Sundramanian, and people of the Four Houses, like the Cams of Cammand, and Per Actamo. Per had been a boy of ten or twelve when the Alds took the city. The people of Actamand put up a hard fight, and when the soldiers took the house they killed all the men and carried off the women as slaves. Per hid from the soldiers in a dry well in a courtyard for three days. He lived now as we did, with a few people in a ruinous house. But he joked with me and was kind, and younger than most of the Waylord's visitors. I was always glad when Per

came. Desac was the only visitor who made it clear I was not welcome to stay and listen to the talk.

The people I didn't know who came to see the Waylord were mostly merchants and such from the city; some of them still had good clothes. Often men came who looked as if they'd been on the road a long time, visitors or messengers from other towns of Ansul, maybe from other waylords. After dark, in winter, sometimes women came, though it was dangerous for women to go alone in the city. One who used to come often had long grey hair; she seemed a little mad to me, but he greeted her with respect. She always brought books. I never knew her name. Often the people from other towns had books, too, hidden in their clothing or in parcels containing food. Once he knew I could enter the secret room, the Waylord would give them to me to take there.

He mostly went to the room at night, which was why we'd never met there before. I hadn't gone often, and never at night. I shared a sleeping room in the front part of the house with Ista and Sosta, and couldn't just vanish. And the days were busy; I had my share of the housework to do, and the worship, and most of the shopping too, since I liked doing it and got better bargains than Sosta did.

Ista was always afraid Sosta would meet soldiers and be taken and raped if she went out alone. She wasn't afraid for me. The Alds wouldn't look at me, she said. She meant they wouldn't like my pale bony face and sheep hair like theirs, because they wanted Ansul girls with round brown cheeks and black sleek hair like Sosta's. "You're lucky to look the way you do," she always told me. And I stayed quite small and slight for a long time, which really was lucky. By order of the Gand of the Alds, women could go in the streets and marketplaces only if they had a man with them. A woman who went alone in the street was a whore, a demon of temptation, and any soldier was free to rape, enslave, or kill her. But the Alds apparently didn't consider old women to be women, and children were mostly though not always ignored. So grannies and children, many of them "siege brats," half-breeds like me, the girls dressed as boys, did most of the shopping and bargaining in the markets.

All the money we had was what an ancestor had hidden long ago when a pirate fleet threatened Ansul; the pirates were driven off, but the family left the luck-hoard, as the Waylord called it, buried out in the woods

behind the house; and that was what we lived on now. So I had to look for the best bargains I could, which took time. So did the worship and the housework. Ista got up very early in the morning to make the bread. The only time I could go regularly to the secret room without being missed and rousing a lot of curiosity and questions would be at night when the others had gone to bed. So I told Ista I wanted to move my bed to my mother's room, just down the hall from the room we all shared. That was fine with her. She and Sosta were generally snoring away not long after we'd washed up from supper; they weren't likely to notice if I wasn't in my room. So every night I'd go softly in darkness through the corridors and passages of the great house to the secret door, and go in, and read and learn with my dear teacher.

Nights when he had visitors, he couldn't come to teach me Aritan or help me with my reading, but I could get along on my own well enough. Often I stayed reading, lost in the story or the history till long after he would have sent me off to bed.

When I started growing a little taller and coming into my womanhood, I did get terribly sleepy sometimes, not at night but in the morning. I couldn't make myself get out of bed, and felt heavy as lead and stupid as a sowbug all day. The Waylord spoke to Ista, though I begged him not to, and asked her to hire the street girl Bomi to do the sweeping and cleaning that I'd been doing. I said to him, "I don't mind sweeping and cleaning! What takes all the time is doing all the altars. We could hire a girl for that, and I'd have lots more time."

That was a mistake. He looked at me slowly: patient, judging, but not approving.

"Your mother's shadow dwells here, with the shadows of our ancestors," he said. "The gods of this house are her gods. She blessed them daily. I do them honor as a man," and it was true, he never missed a day or an offering due, "and you do them honor and receive their blessing as the daughter of our grandmothers." And that was that.

I was ashamed of myself, and also cross. I'd had it in my head that I'd be able to get out of the whole hour it took sometimes to go to all the god-niches, dusting them, giving fresh leaves to Iene, and lighting incense for the Hearthkeepers, and giving and asking blessing of the souls and shadows of the former householders, and thanking Ennu and putting meal

and water on her altar on her days, and stopping in the doorways to say the praise of the One Who Looks Both Ways, and remembering when to light the oil lamps for Deori, and all the rest.

We have more gods in Ansul, I think, than anybody else has anywhere. More gods, and closer to us, the gods of our earth and our days, our blood and bone. Of course I was blessed in knowing that the house was full of them, and that I was doing as my mother had done in returning their blessing, and that my own room-spirit dwelt in the little empty niche in the wall by the door and waited for me to return and watched over my sleep. When I was little, I was proud of doing worship, but I'd been doing it for a long time now. I got tired of the gods. They wanted so much looking after.

But all it took to make me do my worship cheerfully, with all my heart and soul, was to remember that the Alds called our gods evil spirits, demons, and were afraid of them.

And it was good to be reminded that my mother had done the woman's worship in the house. The Waylord had trusted her with that, as he trusted her with the knowledge of the secret room, knowing she was of his own lineage. Thinking about this, I realised clearly for the first time that he and I were the only ones of our lineage left; the few people now in our household were Galvas by choice not by blood. I hadn't thought much about the difference till then.

"Did my mother know how to read?" I asked him once, at night, after my lesson in Aritan.

"Of course," he said, and then, recollecting, "It wasn't forbidden then." He sat back and rubbed his eyes. The torturers had stretched and broken his fingers so that they were twisted and knotted up, but I was used to how his hands looked. I could see that they had been beautiful once.

"Did she come here to read?" I asked, looking around the room, happy to be there. I had come to love it best at night, when warm shadows stretched up and out from the lamp's yellow dome of light, and the gilt lettering on the backs of books winked like the stars you could sometimes glimpse through the small, high skylights.

"She didn't have much time for reading," he said. "She kept everything going here. It was a big job. A waylord had to spend a lot of money—entertaining and all the rest of it. Her books were account books, mostly."

He looked at me as if looking back, comparing me with my mother in his mind. “I showed her the door to this room when we first heard that the Alds had sent an army into the Isma Hills. My mother urged me: Decalo was of our blood, and had a right to the secret, she said. She could preserve it, if things went badly. And the room could be a refuge for her.”

“It was.”

He said a line from “The Tower,” the Aritan poem we had been translating: *Hard is the mercy of the gods*.

I countered with a line from later in the poem: *True sacrifice is true heart’s praise*. He liked it when I could quote back at him.

“Maybe when she was hiding here with me, when I was a baby, maybe she read some of the books,” I said. I had thought that before. When I read something that gave my soul joy and strength, I often wondered if my mother had read it, too, when she was in the secret room. I knew he had. He had read all the books.

“Maybe she did,” he said, but his face was sad.

He looked at me as if studying me with some question in his mind; finally, coming to a decision, he said, “Tell me, Memer. When you first came here, by yourself—before you could read them, what were the books to you?”

It took me a while to answer. “Well, I gave some of them names.” I pointed to the large, leather-bound *Annals of the Fortieth Consulate of Sundraman*. “I called that the Bear. And *Rostan* was Shining Red. I liked it because of the gold on the cover . . . And I built houses with some of them. But I always put them back exactly where they’d been.”

He nodded.

“And then some of them—” I had not meant to say this, but the words came out of me—“I was afraid of them.”

“Afraid. Why?”

I did not want to answer, but again I spoke: “Because they made noises.”

He made a little noise himself, at that: *ah*.

“Which books were they?” he asked.

“It was one of them. Down at . . . at the other end. It groaned.”

Why was I talking about that book? I never thought about it, I didn’t want to think about it, let alone talk about it.

Dearly as I loved being in the secret room, reading with the Waylord, finding my greatest happiness in the treasure of story and poetry and history that was mine there, still I never went all the way to that end of the room where the floor became a rougher, greyer stone and the ceiling was lower, without skylights, so that the light died away slowly into the dark. I knew there was a spring or fountain there because I could hear the faint sound of it, but I'd never gone far enough to see it. Sometimes I thought the room became larger there in the shadow end, sometimes I thought it must grow smaller, like a cave or a tunnel. I had never been past the shelves where the book that groaned was.

"Can you show me which book?"

I sat still at the reading table for a minute and then said, "I was just little. I made up things like that. I pretended the *Annals* was a bear. It was silly."

"You have nothing to fear, Memer," he said softly. "Some might. Not you."

I said nothing. I felt sick and cold. I was afraid. All I knew was that I was going to keep my mouth shut so that nothing else I didn't want to say could come out of it.

Again he sat pondering, and again came to some decision. "Time enough for that later. Now, ten more lines, or bed?"

"Ten more lines," I said. And we bent over "The Tower" again.

Even now it's hard for me to admit, to write about my fear. Back then, at fourteen or fifteen, I kept my thoughts away from it, just as I kept myself away from the end of the room that went back into shadow. Wasn't the secret room the one place where I was free of fear? I wanted it to be only that. I didn't understand my fear and didn't want to know what it was. It was too much like what the Alds called devilry and evil spirits and black magic. Those were nothing but ignorant, hateful words for what they didn't understand—our gods, our books, our ways. I was certain that there were no demons and that the Waylord had no evil powers. Hadn't they tortured him for a year to make him confess his wicked arts, and let him go because he had nothing to confess?

So what was I afraid of?

I knew the book had groaned when I touched it. I was only about six years old then, but I remembered. I wanted to make myself brave. I dared

myself to go all the way to the shadow end. I went, keeping my eyes on the floor right before my feet, until the tiles gave way to rough stone. Then I sidled over to a bookcase, still keeping my eyes down, seeing only that it was low and built into the rock wall, and reached out to touch a book bound in shabby brown leather. When I touched it, it groaned aloud.

I pulled back my hand and stood there. I told myself I hadn't heard anything. I wanted to be brave, so that I could kill Alds when I grew up. I had to be brave.

I walked five steps more till I came to another bookcase and glanced up quickly. I saw a shelf with one book on it. It was small and had a smooth, pearly white cover. I clenched my right hand and reached out my left hand and took the book from the shelf, telling myself it was safe because the cover was pretty. I let the book fall open. There were drops of blood oozing from the page. They were wet. I knew what blood was. I shut it and shoved it back on the shelf and ran to hide in my bear's den under the big table.

I hadn't told the Waylord about that. I didn't want it to be true. I had never gone back down to those shelves in the shadow end.

I'm sorry, now, for that girl of fifteen who wasn't as brave as the child of six, although she longed as much as ever for courage, strength, power against what she feared. Fear breeds silence, and then the silence breeds fear, and I let it rule me. Even there, in that room, the only place in the world where I knew who I was, I wouldn't let myself guess who I might become.

Chapter 3

EVEN TEN years later, it's hard to write truly about how I lied to myself. It's as hard to write about my courage as about my cowardice. But I want this book to be as truthful as it can be, to be of use in the records of the House of the Oracle, and to honor my mother Decalo, to whom I dedicate it. I'm trying to put the memories of all those years in order, because I want to get to where I can tell about meeting Gry the first time. But there wasn't much order in my mind and heart when I was sixteen and seventeen. It was all ignorance and passionate anger and love.

What peace I had, what understanding I had, came from my love for the Waylord and his kindness to me, and from books. Books are at the heart of this book I'm writing. Books caused the danger we were in, the risks we ran, and books gave us our power. The Alds are right to fear them. If there is a god of books it's Sampa the Maker and Destroyer.

Of all the books the Waylord gave me to read, in poetry I most loved *The Transformations*, and in story *The Tales of the Lords of Manva*. I knew the *Tales* were stories not history, but they gave me truths I needed and wanted: about courage, friendship, loyalty to the death, about fighting the enemies of your people, driving them out of your land. All the winter I was sixteen I came to the secret room and read about the friendship of the heroes Adira and Marra. I longed to have a friend and companion like Adira. To be driven with him up into the snows of Sul, and suffer with him there, and then side by side with him to strike down like eagles on the hordes of Dorven, driving them back to their ships—I read that again and again. When I read of the Old Lord of Sul I saw him like my own lord—dark, crippled, noble, fearless. All about me in my city and my life were fear and distrust. What I saw in the streets daily made my heart shrink and cower. My love for the heroes of Manva was my heart's blood. It gave me strength.

That was the year we took the street girl Bomi into the household, and the Waylord gave her the name Galva in the old ceremony at the house altars. She moved into the room down the hall from Sosta's. She worked hard and well, satisfying even Ista most of the time, and was good company too. She was about thirteen; she had no idea when she was born or who her mother was. She was hanging around our street as a beggar for a while, and old Gudit began coaxing her in, luring her like a stray cat. When he'd got her to sleep in the shed in the courtyard, he started making her earn her food by helping him clean the stables, which were full of burned lumber and wrecked furniture and trash. Gudit was determined that the Waylord was going to have horses again. "It stands to reason," he'd say. "How can a waylord travel his ways without a horse to carry him? Would you have him walk on foot? Clear to Essangan or Dom? Bad as his legs are? Like some common peddler, with no dignity? It won't do. He needs horses. It stands to reason."

There never was much to do with Gudit but agree with him. He was crazy, old, hunchbacked, and worked very hard, if not always at the most useful job. He had a foul mouth but a clear heart. When Ista hired Bomi to take my place housecleaning, he was furious, not at Ista but at Bomi for "deserting" him and his precious stable. Every time he saw her for months he cursed her by the shadows of her ancestors, which didn't bother Bomi much, since she didn't know any of her ancestors or where their shadows were. Then he got over it, and she went back to helping him after her housework with that terrible job of cleaning out the stable and rebuilding the stalls, because she had a clear heart too. She took in cats, just as Gudit took her in. The stableyard swarmed with kittens that summer. Ista said that Bomi ate like ten girls, but I thought she ate like one girl and twenty cats. Anyhow, the stable was finally clean, which turned out to be fortunate, even if it didn't exactly stand to reason. And we had no mice.

Ista took a long time to accept the fact that the Waylord had taken me under his particular charge and that I was being "educated," a word she always spoke very carefully, as if it were in another language. And indeed it was a word to be spoken carefully under the dominion of the Alds, who thought reading a deliberate act of evil. Because of that danger, and because she herself had forgotten, as she said, whatever hen-scratching she was taught as a girl ("And what earthly use would all that be to a cook, I

ask you? You just show me how to make a sauce with a pen and ink, will you!")—Ista wasn't entirely comfortable with my becoming educated. But it would never have occurred to her to hold it against me, or to question the Waylord's judgment or his will. Maybe I loved loyalty so dearly because I knew this house was blessed with it.

Anyhow, I still helped Ista with the rough work of the kitchen, and went to the market, with Bomi if she was free to go, alone if not. I stayed short and bony, and by wearing old cut-down men's clothes I could still look fairly much like a child, or at least an unattractive boy. Street-gang boys sometimes saw I was a girl and threw stones at me—boys of my race, of Ansul, acting like filthy Alds. I hated to pass them and kept away from the places they gathered. And I hated the swaggering Ald guards posted around all the marketplaces to "keep order," which meant to bully citizens and take whatever they liked from the vendors' stalls without paying. I tried not to cringe when I passed them. I tried to walk slowly, ignoring them. They stood there puffed up in their blue cloaks and leather cuirasses, with their swords and clubs. They seldom looked as low as me.

Now I have come to the important morning.

It was late spring, four days after my seventeenth birthday. Sosta was to be married in summer and Bomi was helping her sew for her wedding—the green gown and headdress and the groom's coat and headdress too. It was all Ista and Sosta had talked about for weeks, wedding wedding wedding, sewing sewing sewing. Even Bomi blithered about it. I'd never even tried to learn to sew, or to fall in love and want to marry, either. Someday. Someday I'd be ready to find out about that kind of love, but it wasn't time yet. I had to find out who I was, first. I had a promise to keep, and my dear lord to love, and a lot to learn. So I left them chattering, and went out to market alone that morning.

It was a bright sweet day. I went down the steps of the house to the Oracle Fountain. The broad, shallow, green basin was dry and littered, and the pipe from which the water had risen stuck up jagged from the broken, defaced central sculpture. The fountain had been dry all my lifetime and long before that, but I said the blessing to the Lord of the Springs and Waters as I stood beside it. And I wondered, not for the first time, why it was called the Oracle Fountain, and then why Galvamand itself was sometimes called the Oracle House. I should ask the Waylord, I thought.

I looked up from the dead fountain, out over the city, and saw Sul across the straits like a great white rising wave of stone and snow, one banner of mist blown northward from its crest. I thought of Adira and Marra and their ragged soldiers driven up to the icy heights, without food or fire, and how they knelt to praise the god of the mountain and the spirits of the glacier. A crow came flying to them with a spray of leaves in its beak and dropped it before Adira. They thanked the crow, offering it what little bread they had: “In the beak of black iron, the gift of green hope.” My thoughts were always with the heroes.

I spoke praise to Sul and the Seunes, whose white manes I could see just out past the headland. I went on, speaking to the Sill Stone, and touching the street-god’s niche as I passed the corner and turned left to West Street. I’d decided to go to the Harbor Market, which was farther to carry things home from but a better market than Foothill. I was glad to be outdoors, to see the sunlight strike blue-green down into the canal and the bright shadows of the carvings on the bridges.

The sunlight and the sea wind were a joy. As I walked I became quite certain that my gods were with me. I was fearless. I went past the Ald soldiers on guard at the marketplace as if they were wooden posts.

Harbor Market is a broad marble pavement, with the red arcades of the Customs House on the north and east sides and the Tower of the Sea Admirals on the south; to the west it’s open to the harbor and the sea. Long, shallow marble steps with curved, carved banisters go down to the Admiralty boat-houses and the gravel beach. It was all sun and wind and white marble and blue sea that morning, and nearby were the colored awnings and umbrellas of the market stands and all the cheerful racket of the market. I passed by the market god, the round stone that represents the oldest god of the city: Lero, whose name means justice, agreement, doing right. I saluted the god openly, without even thinking of the Ald soldiers.

I had never in my life done that. When I was ten I saw soldiers beat an elderly man and leave him bloody and unconscious on the street under the empty pedestal of a god he had saluted. No one dared go to him while the soldiers were there. I ran away crying and never knew if he had been killed or not. I had not forgotten that, but it did not matter. This was a day without fear for me. A day of blessing. A holy day.

I went on across the square, looking at everything, for I loved the stalls and the goods and the coaxing, insulting vendors. I was heading for the fish market, but went a bit out of the way when I saw they were setting up a large tent in front of the Admirals' Tower. I asked a boy selling dirty rock-sugar what the tent was for.

"A great storyteller from the Uplands," he said, "very famous. I can hold a place for you, young master." Market boys will turn a turd into a penny, as they say.

"I can hold my own place," I said, and he, "Oh, it'll be terrible crowded in no time—he's to be here all day, a terrible famous man—half a penny to hold you a good place right up close?"

I laughed at him and went on.

I was tempted to go over to the tent, though. I felt like doing something foolish, like listening to a storyteller. The Alds are crazy about makers and tellers. Every rich Ald has a storyteller in his retinue, they say, and every company of soldiers too. There hadn't been many in Ansul, the Waylord told me, before the Alds came, but there were more now that books were banned. A few men of my own people told stories for small change on street corners. I had stopped to listen a couple of times, but they mostly told Ald stories to get pennies from the soldiers. I didn't like the Ald stories, all about their wars and their warriors and their tyrant god, nothing I cared a straw for.

It was the word "Uplands" that caught me. A man from the Uplands would not be an Ald. The Uplands were far, far to the north. I'd never even heard of them or any of those distant lands until last year, when I read Eront's *Great History*, with its maps of all the lands of the Western Shore. The market boy repeated the word as he'd heard it spoken, without any meaning for him except somewhere-very-far-away. Even to Eront, the Uplands were mostly hearsay. I didn't remember anything on that part of his map except a big mountain with a strange name I couldn't bring to mind, as I made my way on past the potmenders to the fishwives.

I bargained down a big redspot that would feed us all today, even the cats, and make fishhead soup for tomorrow. I went round the stalls and bought a fresh cheese and some coarse greens that looked good. Then before I set off home I wandered over towards the big tent to see if anything was happening yet. The crowds were thick. I saw riders above the

people's heads, and horse's heads tossing up and down: two Ald officers. The Alds brought no women from their deserts, but they brought their fine, pretty horses, which they treated so well that it was a street joke to call the horses "soldiers' wives."

People in the crowd now were trying to get out of the horses' way, but there was some kind of commotion behind them and a good deal of confusion. Then all at once one of the horses reared up squealing and bolted, bucking stiff-legged like a colt. People in front of me pressed back to get out of its way. It came straight at me. There were people crowding from behind and I couldn't move. The horse came at me—there was no rider on it, and the flailing reins slapped my hand as if thrown at me. I grabbed and pulled. The horse's head came down right by my shoulder, its eye rolling wildly. That head seemed huge, it filled the world. But the horse had stopped. I shortened my grip on the rein up to the bridle and stood firm, not knowing what else to do. The horse tried to toss its head, which half lifted me off the ground, but I hung tight out of pure terror. The horse gave a great whuff through its nostrils and stood still—even pushing up against me a little as if for protection.

All around me people were shouting and screaming, and I could only think of how to keep them from panicking the horse again. "Be quiet, be quiet," I said foolishly to the shouting people. And as if they had heard me they began to back away, leaving a space of marble pavement empty behind the horse. In that white, sunlit space was the Ald officer, who had been thrown hard and was lying stunned, and a woman standing near him, and a lion.

The woman and the lion stood side by side. When they moved, the clear space of pavement moved with them. The crowd had gone almost silent.

I saw the top of some kind of carriage behind the woman and the lion. They turned towards it. The pavement appeared as if by magic in front of them as the crowd backed away. It was a little caravan wagon. The two horses hitched to it stood calmly, facing away from us. The woman opened the back door of the wagon, the lion leapt up into it, its tail disappearing in a lovely curve, and the woman latched the door. She came back at once, and the crowd backed away from her again, even without the lion.

She knelt by the Ald officer, who was sitting up looking dizzy. She spoke to him a little, and then stood up and came to me where I was

standing, still holding the horse because I didn't dare let it go. The crowd drew back with some pushing and shoving, which scared the horse again. It jerked against my grip on the bridle, and the market basket on my arm fell open and the fish and cheese and greens all flew out, which scared the horse worse, and I could not hold it—but the woman was there. She put her hand on the horse's neck and said something to it. It shook its head, with a kind of grumble in its chest, and stood still.

She put out her hand and I gave her the reins. "Well done," she said to me, "well done!" Then she said something else to the horse, close to its ear, softly, and blew a little of her breath into its nostrils. It sighed and drooped its head. I was frantically trying to pick up our food for the next two days before it was trampled on or stolen. Seeing me scrabbling on the pavement, the woman gave the horse a hard pat and bent down to help me. We tumbled the big fish and the greens into the basket, and somebody in the crowd tossed me the cheese.

"Thank you, good people of Ansul!" the woman said in a clear voice and a foreign accent. "He deserves a reward, this boy!" And to the officer, who was now standing up shakily on the other side of his horse, she said, "This boy caught your mare, Captain. It was my lion frightened her. I ask your pardon for that."

"The lion, yes," the Ald said, still dazed. He stared at her, and stared at me, and after a while dug into his belt pouch and held out something to me—a penny.

I was fastening the clasp on my basket. I ignored him and his penny.

"Oh, so generous, so generous," people in the crowd murmured, and somebody crooned, "A fountain of riches!" The officer glared around at them all. He finally refocused on the woman who stood in front of him holding his horse's reins.

"Get your hands off her!" he said. "You—woman—it was you had that animal—a lion—"

The woman tossed the reins at him, slapped the mare lightly, and slipped into the crowd. This time the people closed round her. In a moment I saw the roof of the wagon moving off.

I saw the wisdom of invisibility and ducked away into the old-clothes market while the officer was still trying to remount his mare.

The old-clothes vendor called High Hat had been watching the show, standing on her stool. She clambered down. “Used to horses, are you?” she said to me.

“No,” I said. “Was that a lion?”

“Whatever it is, it goes with that storyteller. And his wife. So they say. Stay to hear him. He’s the prime lord of storytellers, they say.”

“I have to get my fish home.”

“Ah. Fish don’t wait.” She fixed her fierce, mean little eyes on me. “Here,” she said, and flipped me something, which I caught by reflex. It was a penny. She had already turned away.

I thanked her. I left the penny in the hollow under Lero, where people leave god-gifts and poorer people find them. I still didn’t care if the guards saw me, because I knew they wouldn’t. I was just starting up West Street away from the market, past the high red arcades of the Customs, when I heard a clip-clop and the clatter of wheels. There along Customs Street came the two horses and the caravan wagon. The lion woman was perched on the driver’s seat.

“Lift?” she said, while the horses stopped.

I hesitated. I almost thanked her and said no. It was different, and nothing different ever happened, so I didn’t know how to do it. And I was not easy with strangers. I was not easy with people. But the day was blessed, and to turn away blessing is to do ill. I thanked her and climbed up onto the seat beside her.

It seemed very high.

“Where to?”

I pointed up West Street.

She seemed to do nothing, not shaking the reins or clucking her tongue as I had seen drivers do, but the horses set right off. The taller horse was a fine red-brown color, almost as red as the cover of *Rostan*, and the smaller one was bright brown with black legs and mane and tail and a bit of a white star on her forehead. They were bigger than the Ald horses, and more peaceable-looking. Their ears went back and forth, listening constantly; it was pleasant to watch that.

We went along some blocks without speaking. It was interesting to look down the canals, to see the bridges, the facades and windows of buildings

from this height, and people walking along, the way people on horseback see them, looking down on them. I found it made me feel superior.

"The lion is—back there—in the wagon?" I asked at last.

"Halflion," she said.

"From the Asudar desert!" When she said the word "halflion," I remembered it and the picture from the *Great History*.

"Right," she said, with a glance at me. "That's probably why it spooked the mare. She knew what it was."

"But you aren't an Ald," I said, suddenly fearing she was, even though she was dark-skinned and dark-eyed and couldn't be.

"I'm from the Uplands."

"In the far north!" I said, and then could have bitten my tongue in half.

She glanced at me sidelong and I waited for her to accuse me of reading books. But that was not what she had noticed.

"You aren't a boy," she said. "Oh, I am stupid."

"No, I dress like a boy, because . . ." I stopped.

She nodded, meaning no need to explain.

"So how did you learn to handle horses?" she asked.

"I didn't. I never touched a horse before."

She whistled. She had a little, sweet whistle, like a small bird. "Well, then you have the knack, or the luck!"

Her smile was so pleasant I wanted to tell her that it was the luck, that Lero and Luck himself, the deaf god, were giving me a holy day, but I was afraid of saying too much.

"I thought you'd be able to take me to a good stable for these two, you see. I thought you were a stableboy. You were as quick and cool as any old hostler I ever saw."

"Well, the horse just came at me."

"It came to you," she said.

We clip-clop-rattled on for another block.

"We have a stable," I said.

She laughed. "Aha!"

"I'd have to ask."

"Of course."

"There aren't any horses in it. Or feed, or anything. Not since—not for years. It's clean, though. There's some straw. For the cats." Every time I

opened my mouth I talked too much. I clenched my teeth.

“You’re very kind. If it isn’t convenient, never mind. We can find a place. The fact is, the Gand has offered us the use of his stables. But I’d rather not be beholden to the Gand.” And she shot me a glance.

I liked her. I’d liked her from the moment I saw her standing beside her lion. I liked the way she talked and what she said and everything about her.

You must not refuse the blessing.

I said, “My name is Decalo Galva’s daughter Memer of Galvamand.”

She said, “My name is Gry Barre of Roddmant.”

Having introduced ourselves we got shy, and went on to Galva Street in silence. “That’s the house,” I said.

She said in a tone of awe, “It is a beautiful house.”

Galvamand is very large and noble, with its wide courts and stone arches and high windows, but it’s half ruined too, so it touched me that somebody come from far away, who had seen many houses, saw its beauty.

“It’s the House of the Oracle,” I said. “The Waylord’s house.”

At that, the horses stopped short.

Gry looked at me blankly for a moment. “Galva—the Waylord. —Hey, wake up there!” The horses walked patiently on. “This is a day of the greatly unexpected,” she said.

“This is a day of Lero,” I said. We were at the street gate. I slid down off the seat to touch the Sill Stone. I led Gry in, past the dry basin of the Oracle Fountain in the great front court, and around the side of the house to the arched gates of the stable courtyard.

Gudit came out of the stable scowling. “What by all the ghosts of your stupid ancestors do you think I’m going to do for oats?” he shouted. He came up and began to unhitch the red horse.

“Wait, wait,” I said. “I have to talk to the Waylord.”

“Talk away, the beasts can have a drink while you talk, can’t they? Here, let be, lady. I’ll see to it.”

Gry let him unhitch the horses and lead them over to the trough. She watched the old man open the spigot and saw the clear water pour into the trough. She looked interested and admiring. “Where do you get the water from?” she asked Gudit, and he started to tell her about the springs of Galvamand.

As I passed the wagon it shook a little. There was a lion in it. I wondered what Gudit would say about that.

I ran on into the house.

Chapter 4

THE WAYLORD was in the back gallery talking with Desac. Desac was not a native of Ansul but of Sundraman; he had been a soldier in their army. He never brought books or talked of books. He stood very straight, spoke harshly, and seldom smiled. I thought he must have known much grief. He and the Waylord treated each other with respect and friendship. Their long conversations were always private. They both looked at me rather sternly, in silence, as I walked down the room to where they were sitting under the end window in a patch of sunlight. The back part of the house, the oldest part, all of stone and built right up against the hillside, is chilly, and we didn't have much firewood to warm the rooms.

I greeted them. The Waylord raised his eyebrows, waiting for my message.

"There are travellers here from the far north who need stabling for their horses. He is a storyteller and she," I paused, "she has a lion. A halflion. I told her I would ask if they may keep their horses here." As I spoke I felt like a person in a tale of the Lords of Manva, bearing a request from a noble visitor to a noble host.

"Circus people," Desac said. "Nomads."

Outraged at his contemptuous tone, I said, "No!"

The Waylord's eyebrows went down at my rudeness.

"She is Gry of the Barres of Roddmant of the Uplands," I said.

"And where are these Uplands?" said Desac, speaking to me as to a child.

"In the far north," I said.

The Waylord said, "Memer, a little further, please?" That was how he always asked me to go on translating a line of Aritan or explaining anything. He liked me to do it in order, making sense. I tried.

“Her husband came to tell stories in the Harbor Market. So they were there. Her lion frightened an Ald’s horse. I caught the horse. Then she quieted it. Then when I was coming home I met her with her wagon and she brought me home. She was looking for stabling. The lion is in the wagon. Gudit is watering the horses.”

Only as I mentioned coming home did I realise that the market basket with a ten-pound fish and cheese and greens in it was still weighing down my arm.

There was a pause.

“You offered her use of the stables?”

“I said I’d ask you.”

“Will you ask her to come to me?”

“Yes,” I said, and got away quickly.

I left the basket in the pantry cooler—Ista and the others were all still sewing in the workroom—and ran back to the stableyard. Gry and Gudit were talking about dogs; that is, Gudit was telling her about the great followhounds of Galvamand in the old days, that ran with the horses and guarded the gates. “Nowadays all it is is cats. Cats everywhere,” he said, spitting aside. “No meat for dogs any more, see. It stands to reason. It was meat they were themselves, those dogs, in the siege years.”

“Maybe it’s just as well you have no followhounds just now,” she said. “They’d be anxious about the contents of our wagon.”

I said, “The Waylord asks if you will be pleased to come into the house. He would come himself but it’s hard for him to walk far.” I wanted so badly to welcome her rightly, nobly, generously, as the Lords of Manva welcomed strangers to their houses.

“With pleasure,” she said, “but first—”

“Leave the horses to me,” said Gudit. “I’ll put ’em both in the loose box and then be off for a bit of hay from Bossti down the way there.”

“There’s a truss of hay and a barrel of oats in the wagon,” Gry said, going to show him, but he brushed her off—“Na na na, nobody brings their own feed to the Waylord’s house. Come along here, then, old lady.”

“She’s Star,” said Gry, “and he’s Branty.” At their names both horses looked round at her, and the mare whuffed.

“And it would be well if you knew what else is in the wagon,” Gry said, and there was something in her voice, though she spoke low and mild, that

made even Gudit turn and listen to her.

“A cat,” she said. “Another cat. But a big one. She’s trustworthy, but not to be taken by surprise. Don’t open the wagon door, please. Memer, shall I leave her here in the wagon or shall she come with me into the house?”

When you’re lucky, press your luck. I wanted Desac to see the “circus” lion and be scared stiff. “If you wish to bring her . . .”

She studied me a moment.

“Best leave her here,” she said with a smile. And thinking of Ista and Sosta screaming and screeching at the sight of a lion passing by in the corridor, I knew she was right.

She followed me through the courtyards around to the front entrance. On the threshold she stopped and murmured the invocation of the guest to the housegods.

“Are your gods the same as ours?” I asked.

“The Uplands haven’t much in the way of gods. But as a traveller I’ve learned to honor and ask blessing of any gods or spirits that will grant it.”

I liked that.

“The Alds spit on our gods,” I said.

“Sailors say it’s unwise to spit into the wind,” she said.

I had brought her the long way round, wanting her to see the reception hall and the great court and the wide hallways leading to the old university rooms and galleries and the inner courts. It was all bare, unfurnished, the statues broken, the tapestries stolen, the floors unswept. I was half proud for her to see it and half bitterly ashamed.

She walked through it with wide, keen eyes. There was a wariness in her. She was easy and open, but self-contained and on the alert, like a brave animal in a strange place.

I knocked at the carved door of the back gallery and the Waylord bade us enter. Desac had gone. The Waylord stood to greet the visitor. They bowed their heads formally as they spoke their names. “Be welcome to the house of my people,” he said, and she, “My greeting to the House of Galva and its people, and my honor to the gods and ancestors of the house.”

When they looked up and at each other, I saw his eyes full of curiosity and interest, and hers shining with excitement.

“You’ve come a long way to bring your greeting,” he said.

“To meet Sulter Galva the Waylord.”

His face closed, like a book shutting.

“Ansul has no lords but the Alds,” he said. “I am a person without importance.”

Gry glanced at me as if for support, but I had none to give. She said to him, “Your pardon if I spoke amiss. But may I tell you what brought us to Ansul, my husband Orrec Caspro and me?”

Now at that name, he looked as utterly amazed as she had when I said his title to her.

“Caspro is here?” he said—“Orrec Caspro?” He took a deep breath. He gathered himself and spoke in his stiffest, most formal tone: “The fame of the poet runs before him. He honors our city with his presence. Memer told me that a maker is to speak in the marketplace, but I did not know who it was.”

“He will recite for the Gand of the Alds too,” said Gry. “The Gand sent for my husband. But that’s not why we came to Ansul.”

The pause was a heavy one.

“We sought this house,” Gry said. “And to this house your daughter brought me—though I didn’t know she was its daughter, and she didn’t know I sought it.”

He looked at me.

“Truth,” I said. And because he still looked at me, distrustful, I said, “The gods have been with me all day. It is a day of Lero.”

That carried weight with him. He rubbed his upper lip with the first knuckle of his left hand the way he does when he’s thinking hard. Then suddenly he came to a decision, and the distrust was gone. “As you are brought in Lero’s hands, the blessing of the house is yours,” he said. “And all in it is yours. Will you sit down, Gry Barre?”

I saw that she watched the way he moved as he showed her to the claw-foot chair, that she saw his crippled hands as he lowered himself into the armchair. I perched on the high stool by the table.

“As Caspro’s fame has come to you,” she said, “so the fame of the libraries of Ansul has come to us.”

“And your husband came here to see those libraries?”

“He seeks the nourishment of his art and his soul in books,” she said.

At that I wanted to give all my heart to her, to him.

“He must know,” the Waylord said without emotion, “that the books of Ansul were destroyed, with many of those who read them. No libraries are permitted in the city. The written word is forbidden. The word is the breath of Atth, the only god, and only by the breath may it be spoken. To entrap it in writing is blasphemy, abominable.”

I flinched, hating to hear him speak those words. He sounded as if he believed them, as if they were his own words.

Gry was silent.

He said, “I hope Orrec Caspro brought no books with him.”

“No,” she said, “he came to seek them.”

“ ‘As well seek bonfires in the sea,’ ” he said.

She came right back, “ ‘Or milk a desert stone.’ ”

I saw the flicker in his eyes, that almost hidden glint, when she answered with the rest of Denios’ line.

“May he come here?” she asked, quite humbly.

I wanted to shout Yes! Yes! I was shocked, ashamed, when the Waylord did not at once answer inviting him warmly to come, to be welcome. He hesitated, and then all he said was, “He is the guest of the Gand Ioratth?”

“A message came to us when we were in Urdile, saying that Ioratth, the Gand of the Alds of Ansul, would make welcome Orrec Caspro, the Gand of All Makers, if he would come and display his art. We are told that the Gand Ioratth is very fond of hearing tales and poems. As are his people. So we came. But not as his guests. He offered stabling for our horses, but not for us. His god would be offended if unbelievers came under his roof. When Orrec goes to perform for the Gand it will be outdoors, under the open sky.”

The Waylord said something in Aritan; I wasn’t sure, but I thought it was about the sky having room enough for all the stars and gods. He looked at her to see if she understood the line.

She cocked her head. “I am an ignorant woman,” she said in her mild way.

He laughed. “Hardly!”

“No, truly. My husband has taught me a little, but my own knowledge is not in words at all. My gift is to listen to those who don’t talk.”

“You walk with a lion, Memer said.”

“I do. We travel a lot, and travellers are vulnerable. After our good dog died, I looked for another guardian companion. We met with a company of nomads, tellers and musicians, who’d trapped a halflion and her cub in the desert hills south of Vadalva. They kept the mother for their shows, but sold us the cub. She’s a good companion, and trustworthy.”

“What is her name?” I asked very softly.

“Shetar.”

“Where is she now?” the Waylord asked.

“In our wagon, in your stableyard.”

“I hope to see her. As I too am unburdened with belief, I am free to offer you the shelter of my roof, Gry Barre—you and your husband, your horses and your lion.”

She thanked him for his generosity, and he said, “The poor are rich in generosity.” Ever since she had spoken her husband’s name, his face had been alight. “Memer,” he said, “which room—?”

I’d already decided that and was calculating whether the fish could feed eight if Ista made a stew with it. “The east room,” I said.

“How about the Master’s room?”

That startled me a little, for I knew his mother had lived in that beautiful, spacious apartment, upstairs from his rooms in this oldest part of the house. Long ago when Galvamand housed the university and library of Ansul, that apartment had belonged to its head, the Master. Its unbroken, small-paned windows looked over the lower roofs of the house westward to Sul. There was a bedstead in it and nothing much else, now. But I could bring a mattress from the east room, and the chair from mine.

“I’ll lay a fire there,” I said, for I knew the unused room would be dank and cold.

The Waylord looked at me with great kindness. He said to Gry Barre, “Memer is my hands and half my head. She is not the daughter of my body, but of my house and heart. Her gods and ancestors are mine.”

I knew well that I was of the blood of Galva, but it gave me a painful joy to hear him say what he said.

“In the market,” Gry said, “a horse bolted when it saw my cat. It threw its rider and ran straight at Memer. She caught the reins and stopped and held it.”

“I’ll go get the room ready,” I said, finding praise hard to bear.

Gry excused herself and came with me, wanting to help me with the room. Once we had made up the bed and got a fire going in the hearth, it was done, and she said she'd go bring her husband here from the Harbor Market. I longed to hear him, and she saw that. "He'll be nearly done speaking, I think," she said, "but I'd be glad of your company. I'll leave Shetar in the wagon. She's fine there." As we went out she added, "One lion is enough."

How could I not love her?

So Gry Barre and I went afoot back down to the Harbor Market. There I first heard the maker Orrec Caspro speak.

The tent was full, and the front and sides had been raised for people to stand outside it, crowded together like trees on a mountainside, all still, listening. He was telling the tale of the Fire-Tailed Bird from Denios' *Transformations*. I knew it, and older people of Ansul there knew it, but to the Ald soldiers—and there were many, all in the best places, up close to the platform in the tent—and to most of the young people, it was new, a wonder. All stood with moving lips and gazing eyes, rapt in the story-poem. Caught in it too, hearing the teller's even, resonant voice and clear northern accent, I hardly saw him himself. I listened, and saw the story happen.

When he was done, the great crowd stood in silence for a long breath's space, and then said, "Ah!" And then they began to applaud him, the Alds by hitting their palms together loudly, and we by crying the old praise-word, "Eho, eho!" I saw him then, a handsome, thin, straight, dark man, with a certain defiance in his stance up there on the dais, though he was most gracious with the crowd.

We could not get near him for a long time. "I should have brought the other lion too," Gry said, as we tried in vain to pry through the massed backs of the soldiers and officers with their blue cloaks and their sheep hair and their swords and crossbows and bludgeons, all pressing round the speaker, who had come down among them.

When he leapt back up on the platform and scanned the crowd, Gry made her bird's whistle, loud and piercing this time. At once he saw her; she nodded to our left; and a few minutes later he met us by the steps of the Customs.

Now that the soldiers had dispersed, many citizens trailed him, but they were timid, unwilling to press forward. Only one elderly man came up to him, and bowed as we bow in thanks to our gods, deeply, with open hands that hold the gift given and received. “Praise to the maker,” he whispered. He straightened up and walked swiftly away. He was in tears. He was a man who had brought books to the Waylord more than once. I didn’t know his name.

Orrec Caspro saw us and strode forward. He took both Gry’s hands for a moment. “Get me out!” he said. “Where’s Shetar?”

“At Galvamant,” she said, pronouncing the name northern-wise. “I am with Decalo’s daughter Memer of Galvamant. We’re to be guests of that house.”

His eyes widened. He greeted me courteously and asked no questions, but he looked as if he had some.

“Please excuse me,” I said on the spur of the moment, “I forgot something at the market this morning. You know the way. I’ll catch up.” And I left them. It was true that Ista would need more greens for a stew for eight.

I always wondered why the makers leave housekeeping and cooking out of their tales. Isn’t it what all the great wars and battles are fought for—so that at day’s end a family may eat together in a peaceful house? The tale tells how the Lords of Manva hunted and gathered roots and cooked their suppers while they were camped in exile in the foothills of Sul, but it doesn’t say what their wives and children were living on in their city left ruined and desolate by the enemy. They were finding food too, somehow, cleaning house and honoring the gods, the way we did in the siege and under the tyranny of the Alds. When the heroes came back from the mountain, they were welcomed with a feast. I’d like to know what the food was and how the women managed it.

I saw Gry and her husband at the top of West Street when I started up the hill from the Gelb Bridge. When I came into the kitchen, Sosta and Bomi were all agog, having met the guests, and Ista was on the very edge of a tantrum—“How in the name of Sampa the Destroyer is a woman to feed guests on a scrap of fish and a kale stalk?” The additional greens and celery-root I brought averted disaster. She set to work grating ginger and chopping thessony and ordering Bomi and even Sosta about unmercifully.

Galvamand would not scant its guests or shame its ancestors if Ista could help it. This is part of what I meant about housework. If it isn't important, what is? If it isn't done honorably, where is honor?

Ista could tell us about the banquets for forty in the great dining hall in the old days, but we always ate in what she called the pantry, a large room full of shelves and counters, between the dining hall and the kitchens. Gudit had built a table of pine scraps, and we had found a chair here and a chair there. The Waylord's longest walk in a day was often from his room, through the corridors, past the staircases and the inner courtyards, to dinner in the pantry. Tonight he came wearing the heavy, stiff, grey robe that was the only fine clothing he had left from the good days. All of us had cleaned up a bit except Gudit, who smelled very much of horse. Gry wore a long red shirt over narrow silk pants, and her husband a white shirt, black coat, and black kilt that left his legs bare below the knee. He was very good-looking in his black, and Sosta goggled at him like the fish on its slab in the market.

But the Waylord was a handsome man too for all his lameness, and when he greeted Orrec Caspro I thought again of the heroes Adira and Marra. Both he and Caspro stood very straight, though it must have cost the Waylord more to do so.

We sat to table, Gry at the Waylord's right hand and Caspro at his left, Sosta next to Bomi down the table, Gudit next to me, and the place at the foot empty, because Ista would never sit with us till late in the meal. "A cook at the table, a burnt dinner," she said, which may have been true when there were more people to be served and more dinner to burn. She stood while my lord gave the man's blessing and I the woman's, and then she vanished while we ate her excellent bread and fish stew. I was glad for the honor of our house that the food was so good.

"You of Ansul do as we do in the Uplands," Caspro said. His voice was the most beautiful thing about him; it was like a viol. "The household eats at one table. It makes me feel at home."

"Tell us something of the Uplands," the Waylord said.

Caspro looked about at us, smiling, not knowing where to begin. "Do you know anything of the place at all?"

"It's far to the north," I said, as no one else spoke, "a hilly land, with a great mountain—" and the name came to me then as if I was seeing

Eront's map—"the Carrantages? And the people are said to practice wizardry. But that's only what Eront says."

Bomi and Sosta stared, the way they always did when I knew anything they didn't. I thought it very stupid—as if I should stare every time they talked about how to hem a gusset, or gusset a hem, whichever it is. I didn't always understand them, but I didn't stare at them as if they were crazy for knowing what they knew.

Caspro said to me, "The Carrantages is our great mountain, as Sul is yours. The Uplands are all hill and stone, and the farmers poor. Some of them have powers, indeed; but wizardry is a dangerous word. We call them gifts."

"Among the Alds, we called them nothing at all," said Gry in her dry, slightly teasing way. "Not wishing to be stoned to death for the sin of coming from a gifted people."

"What," Bomi began, and then stuck. For once she was shy. Gry encouraged her, and Bomi asked, "Do you have a gift?"

"I get along with animals, and they with me. The gift is called calling, but it's more like hearing, actually."

"I have no gift," Caspro said with a smile.

"I cannot believe you so ungrateful," the Waylord said, not joking.

Caspro accepted the reproof. "You're right, Waylord, I was indeed given a great gift. But it was . . . It was the wrong one." He frowned and sought almost desperately for words, as if it were the most important thing in the world that he should answer honestly. "Not wrong for me. But for my people. So it took me from them, from the Uplands. I have great joy in my art. But there are times—times I'm sick at heart, missing the rocks and bogs and the silence of the hills."

The Waylord looked at him patiently, unjudging, approving. "One can be sick for home in one's own city, in one's own house, Orrec Caspro. You are an exile among exiles here." He raised his glass. There was water in it; we had no wine. "To our homecoming!" he said, and we all drank with him.

"If your gift is the wrong one, what would the right one have been?" asked Bomi, whose shyness once gone is gone forever.

Caspro looked at her. His face changed again. He might have given a light answer to her light question and she'd have been satisfied, but that

wasn’t in him to do.

“My family’s gift is the unmaking,” he said, and involuntarily put both hands over his eyes for a moment—a strange moment. “But I was given the gift of making. By mistake.” He looked up as if bewildered. I saw Gry watching him across the table, intent, concerned.

“No mistake about it,” said the Waylord with a calm, genial authority that lightened the uncanny mood. “And all you were given you give to us in your poetry. I wish I could come hear you.”

“Don’t encourage him,” Gry said, “he’ll spout you poems till the cows come home.”

Sosta giggled. I think it was the first thing anybody said she understood, and she thought it was funny to say “till the cows come home.”

Caspro laughed too, and told us that he could speak poetry forever. “The only thing I like better than saying is hearing,” he said, “or reading.” In his glance at the Waylord there was a signal or challenge, heavier than the words themselves. But then, reading was a heavy word, in our city under the Alds.

“This was a good house for poetry, once,” my lord said. “Will you have a little more fish, Gry Barre? Ista! Are you coming or not, woman?”

Ista likes it when he raises his voice, when he orders her to sit and eat. She bustled in at once, bobbed to the guests, and, as soon as she had blessed her bread, asked, “What’s Gudit going on about, about a lion?”

“It’s in the wagon,” Gudit said. “I told you, you godless fool. Don’t go meddle with that wagon, I said. You didn’t, did you?”

“Of course I did nothing of the sort.” Offended by Gudit’s coarseness and his loud voice, Ista became ladylike, almost mincing. “A lion is nothing to me. Will it be staying in the wagon, then?”

“She’ll be best staying with us, if it won’t disturb the household,” Gry said, but seeing the sensation this caused in Sosta and Bomi and possibly Ista, she added quickly, “But maybe it’s better she sleeps in the wagon.”

“That sounds cramped. May we meet our other guest?” said the Waylord. I had never seen him like this, genial, forceful. I was seeing Ista’s Waylord of the good days. “Has she had her dinner? Please, bring her in.”

“Ohhh,” Sosta said faintly.

“ ’Twon’t be you she eats, Sos,” Ista said. “More likely she’d fancy a bit of fish?” She was not going to be overawed by any lion. “I kept out the head, just for broth you know. She’s more than welcome to it.”

“I thank you, Ista, but she ate early this morning,” Gry said. “And tomorrow’s her fasting day. A fat lion is a terrible thing to see.”

“I have no doubt,” said Ista primly.

Gry excused herself and presently came in with her halflion, led on a short leash. The animal was the size of a large dog but very different in shape and gait—a cat, long-bodied yet compact, lithe, smooth, long-tailed, with the short face and forward-looking jewel eyes of a cat, and a pace between slouching and majestic. She was sand-colored, tawny. The hairs round her face were lighter, long and fine, and the short fur round the mouth and under the chin was white. The long tail ended in a little tawny plume. I was half scared half enchanted. The halflion sat down on her haunches, looked all around at us, opened her mouth to show a broad pink tongue and fearsome white teeth in a yawn, closed her mouth, closed her great topaz eyes, and purred. It was a loud, rumbling, deliberate purr.

“Aw,” Bomi said. “Can I pet her?”

And I followed Bomi. The lion’s fur was lovely, deep and thick. When you scratched around her round, neat ears she leaned into your hand and the purr deepened.

Gry led her to the Waylord. Shetar sat down beside his chair and he put his hand out for her to sniff. She sniffed it thoroughly and then looked up at him, not with the long dog gaze: one keen cat glance. He put his hand on her head. She sat there with half-shut eyes, purring, and I saw the big talons of her forepaws working in and out gently against the slate floor.

Chapter 5

WHEN DINNER was done, the Waylord invited our guests to come with him to his apartments, glancing at me to assure me I was welcome. We made our way at the slow pace of his lameness back through the corridors and past the deserted rooms and inner courts. We sat in the back gallery. The evening light was fading in the windows.

"I think we have a good deal to talk about," the Waylord said to his guests. He looked at them both, and the flash of opal fire was in his eyes. "Gry Barre says that you came to Ansul in part to find me. And Memer told me that her meeting with you was blessed by Lero. I am sure of that blessing. But may I ask why you sought me?"

"May I tell you all the story?" Caspro asked.

The Waylord laughed and said, " 'Shall I allow the sun to shine, or permit the river to run?' " That is what Raniu said when the great harper Moro asked him if he might play his harp in the temple.

Caspro began hesitantly. "Because of what books were to me when I was a boy—because what was written was a light—a light in darkness to me —" He paused. "Then, when I came down to the cities and began to learn how much there was to be learned, I was half in despair—"

"You were a calf in clover," Gry said.

"Well, yes, that too." We all laughed, and he went on more easily. "At any rate, as I see it, making poetry is the least of what I do. Finding what other makers made, speaking it, printing it, recovering it from neglect or oblivion, relighting the light of the word—this is the chief work of my life. So when I'm not earning my living in the marketplace, I'm in the library or the bookdealer's stall or the scholar's den, asking about books and writings, learning about forgotten makers, those known only in their city or country. And everywhere I've been in Bendraman, Urdile, the City States, Vadalva, in every university or library or marketplace, the wisest,

most learned people speak of the learning of Ansul and the Library of Ansul."

"In the past tense," said the Waylord.

"Waylord, I work with what's lost, buried, hidden. Lost by time and ill chance, maybe, or hidden from destruction, from the prejudice of a ruler or a priest. In the foundations of the old council halls of Mesun in Urdile we found the earliest of all the testaments of the *Life of Raniu,* written on calfskin and sealed in an unmarked vault five hundred years ago, in the reign of the tyrant Terensa. He drove out teachers and destroyed temples and writings throughout the city. He ruled for forty years. The Alds have ruled Ansul only seventeen years."

"Memer's lifetime," the Waylord said. "A lot can be lost in seventeen years. A generation learns that knowledge is punished and safety lies in ignorance. The next generation doesn't know they're ignorant, because they don't know what knowledge was. Those who came after Terensa in Mesun didn't dig up the buried writings. They didn't know of them."

"A rumor survived," Caspro said.

"There are always rumors."

"I follow them."

"Was it some particular rumor that brought you here? The name of a lost maker, a lost poem?"

"Mostly the reputation of Ansul as the center of learning and of writing in all the Western Shore. What most drew me was the tale—the rumor—of a great library that was here even before the founding of the University of Ansul. In it were said to be writings from the days when we still spoke Aritan, and had some memory of the lands beyond the desert, from which we came. Perhaps there were even books brought from the Sunrise, across the desert, in the beginning of our history. I have longed for years to come here, to ask, to seek any knowledge of that library!"

The Waylord said nothing, made no response.

"I know that my quest puts me in some danger. It puts in worse danger every man I speak to about it—even if he doesn't answer."

The Waylord nodded slightly. His face was expressionless.

"I know the Alds," Caspro said. "We lived among them some while."

"That took courage."

"Less than I ask of you."

I could hardly bear it, the suppressed passion in both of them, the fire and fear and challenge. I wanted to say to them, shout at them, “Trust each other! Can’t you trust each other?” and knew it was foolish, childish, and wanted to cry.

Gry Barre nudged Shetar. The lion got up and lounged over to me and sat on her haunches in her peaceable, sleepy fashion right in front of my legs, so that I could scratch her ears. I did that, and the touch soothed me. Gry looked at us. She didn’t quite wink, but I thought I read in her look something like, “They’re men; this is the only way they know how to do it.”

The Waylord had risen to fetch a candle. I should have done that, but he was already bringing the heavy iron candlestick to the table, awkwardly, having little grip in his hands. Gry lit the candle with the strike-box. The light bloomed, making the rest of the room dark and our faces vivid against the darkness and the faint glimmer of the windows. Shetar gave a grunt and sank down at my feet in picture-book lion pose, front paws outstretched, eyes gazing at the light.

“I revised my opinion of courage,” the Waylord said, “while I was in the Gand’s prison. I thought it was something a man owed himself, like pride or self-respect. I learned that we owe it only to the gods.” His gaze too was on the steady yellow flame of the candle.

Caspro did not speak.

“I was taken there,” he went on, “because they, like you, had heard tales and rumors. Tales and rumors that brought them here. To Ansul. Do you know why the Alds invaded my country and laid siege to my city?”

“I thought greed, envy of your green lands.”

“Why this green land? Vadalva is closer, and as unwarlike as we are. You say you lived a while in Asudar. Tell me, then, if I go astray: The Alds have a king, a Gand of Gands, who is also the high priest of Atth. His power is great. All slaves are his to claim. He commands the armies.”

Caspro nodded.

“The name of this priest-king who took the throne of Asudar thirty years ago is Dorid. He believes that Atth wishes him to combat evil on earth. Atth is what the Alds call the only god they acknowledge; it means Lord. The true name of Atth is not spoken. All good belongs to Atth. But there is a great power of evil, and it is called Obatth, the Other Lord.”

Again Caspro nodded.

The Waylord asked, “Do you know the story of the Thousand True Men?”

“The Alds say that if a thousand true soldiers could be gathered together, Obatth could be vanquished forever. Or, some say, a hundred.”

“And some say ten,” said Gry.

The Waylord smiled, though not with much cheer. “I like that version,” he said. “Did they say where these true men were to meet?”

“No.” Caspro looked at Gry, who also shook her head.

“Well, the story was told me in a manner that made it hard to forget. It was the son of our Gand here, Iddor son of Ioratth, who told it to me. Many times.” He paused for a while and then said, very low, “I don’t like to speak it here in this house. Forgive me. This is what I was told: All light and righteousness belong to Atth, the Burning God, whose power is visible in the sun. There is nothing sacred outside the Fire of Atth. All fire is holy for his sake. The moon they despise, calling it the slave, the witch. The earth is a place of exile. A foul place, unholy, infested by demons, utterly cold and dark but for the light and warmth reflected on it by the sun of Atth. And on earth Obatth, the enemy of Atth, is manifest—in the evil fortunes of men, and the evil men do, and the evil spirits they worship. And most of all, in one certain place.

“In that place, all the foulness of earth gathers together, darkness drawing inward into earth, the reverse of light shining out from the sun. It is an anti-sun that eats light. It is black, wet, cold, vile. As the sun is being, it is unbeing. A void, a great hole in the earth, deep beyond depth. It is called the Night Mouth.

“And it is there that the Thousand True Men are to gather to bear the Fire of Atth into the kingdom of Obatth. They will enter the darkness, make war on the Other Lord, and destroy him. Then they will come forth with their banners of flame, and all earth will burn as bright as the sun both night and day. All demons and shadows will be driven into outer darkness beyond the stars. And the sons of Asudar will rule over all men in righteousness, worshipping the Burning God.”

The Waylord’s voice was monotonous and rough, scarcely audible, and I saw that his hands were clenched one in the other.

“Old traditions of Asudar said that the Night Mouth was in the west, on the coast. Dorid the priest-king in his city Medron ordered the lesser priests of Atth to find this center of darkness. Some thought the mountain Sul itself contained the Night Mouth, but the others said no: Sul, they said, is a volcano, it contains fire and so is sacred to Atth. Opposite it—across the water from it—would be the dark place, the bottomless well of evil. The Night Mouth would be found here, in the city of Ansul.

“It is supposed to be guarded by a wizard of terrible powers, who can summon armies of evil spirits, the foul emanations of the earth. And the gods of the heathen will gather to defend it, the thousand false gods.

“So the armies of Asudar were sent to take the country and city of Ansul by force and find the Night Mouth. When it is found, King Dorid will send the Thousand True Men into it with banners of fire, a burning army. Light will banish darkness, and good will vanquish evil.”

He drew a harsh breath. He bit his lips and looked away from the candle, hiding his face in shadow.

“I never heard that tale,” Caspro said. His own voice was shaken. He spoke, I think, to give the Waylord time to recover himself. “Tales of how earth is the battlefield of Atth and Obatth, yes. An unending war. And people in the desert knew there was a mountain called Sul far in the west, an uncanny place, but only because it’s surrounded by the sea. Salt water they call the curse of Obatth . . . This tale of the Night Mouth must be a secret knowledge. Priestly lore.”

“Useful to justify an invasion,” said Gry.

“If so, it would be more widely known, wouldn’t it? Do the common soldiers know the story, Waylord?”

“I don’t know. I know they were told to search for certain things. Certain houses. Caves, wizards, idols, books . . . There are many caves in the hills above the city. And idols and books—there was no end of them in Ansul. The soldiers were diligent.”

We were all silent for a while.

“How are you governed?” Gry asked.

There was something in her voice; it wasn’t as beautiful as her husband’s voice, but there was something in it that relieved me, quieted me, the way touching the lion’s fur did. When the Waylord answered her he sounded a little less strained.

“We’re enslaved, not governed. The Gand Ioratth and his officers are all the law. For the most part, we of Ansul hold the city together by doing things as we used to do them, as best we can, while the Alds exact tribute, and punish blasphemy, and hold aloof. They’ve lived here as soldiers in a garrison ever since they took the city. They sent no colonists. They brought no women. They don’t want to live here. They hate it, land and city and sea. The earth itself is a place of exile to them, and this is the worst of it.”

In the silence that followed, Shetar raised her head from her paws, said, “Rrrawow!” in a deep, throaty voice, and yawned mightily.

“You’re right,” Gry said to her. She and Caspro rose to say good night, thanking the Waylord for his hospitality, and thanking me too.

I gave her an oil lamp with a mica shade to light their way to their room. I saw that both she and her husband touched the god-niche by the door as they left the room. I watched them go down the corridor side by side, his hand on her shoulder, the lion pacing softly after them and the glimmer of the lamp running along the bare stone walls.

I turned back to see the Waylord gazing at the candle, his face very weary. I thought how alone he was. His friends came and went again, and here he must stay. I had thought of his solitude as his choice, his nature, maybe because it came so natural to me. But he had no choice.

He looked up at me. “What have you brought to Galvamand?” he said.

I was frightened by his tone. I said at last, “Friends, I think.”

“Oh yes. Powerful friends, Memer.”

“Waylord—”

“Well?”

“This Night Mouth, this Obatth. Did they come here to the house, to Galvamand—the redhats, the soldiers—did they take you to prison, because they thought—?”

He didn’t answer for a while. He sat stiffly, his shoulders hunched, as he did when in pain. “Yes,” he said.

“But is it—is there anything here—?”

I didn’t know what I was asking, but he did. He looked up at me, a fierce look. “What they seek is theirs. It’s in their hearts, not ours. This house hides no evil. They bring their darkness with them. They will never know what is in the heart of this house. They will not look, they will not see. That door will never open to them. You needn’t fear, Memer. You can’t

betray it. I tried. I tried to betray it. Over and over. But the gods of my house and the shadows of my dead forgave me before I could do it. They wouldn't let me do it. All the hands of all the givers of dreams were on my mouth."

I was very frightened now. He had never spoken of the torture. He was clenched and hunched and trembling. I wanted to go to him but did not dare.

He made a slight gesture and whispered, "Go on. Go to bed, child."

I went forward and put my hand on his.

"I'm all right," he said. "Listen. You did right to bring them here. You brought blessing. Always, Memer. Now go on."

I had to leave him sitting there, shaking, alone.

I was tired, it had been a long day, an immense day, but I could not go to bed. I went to the wall under the hill and opened the door in it with the words written in air and went into the secret room.

As I went into it, all at once I was afraid. My heart went cold, my hair stirred on my neck.

That horrible image of a black sun that sucked out warmth and light from the world—it was like a hole in my mind, now, sucking meaning out, leaving nothing but cold and emptiness.

I had always been afraid of the far end of this long, strange room stretching off into darkness. I had kept away from the shadow end, turned my back on it, not thought about it, told myself, "That's something I'll understand later." Now it was later. Now I had to understand what my house was built on.

But all I had to make understanding out of was that tale of a Night Mouth, that hateful image from the people I hated.

And Orrec Caspro's tale. A library, he had said. A great library. The greatest in the world. A place of learning, of the light of the mind.

I could not even look at the shadow end of the room. I wasn't ready yet for that, I had to gather my strength. I went to the table, the one I used to build houses under and pretend to be a bear cub in its den. I set down the lamp and laid my hands palm down on the table, pressing them hard on the smooth wood, to feel its smoothness, its solidity. It was there.

There was a book on it.

The two of us always returned books to the shelves before we left the room, an old habit of order the Waylord had from his mother, who had been his teacher as he was mine. I didn't recognise this book. It didn't look old. It must be one of those that people had brought him secretly to be hidden away, to be saved from the destruction of Atth. Occupied with learning all I could of the great makers of the past and the knowledge they had gathered, I had scarcely looked yet at the shelves that held those random, rescued, newer books. The Waylord must have set this one out for me while I went back to the market with Gry.

I opened it and saw it was printed, with the metal letters they use now in Bendraman and Urdile, which make it easy to make a thousand copies of a book. I read the title: *Chaos and Spirit: The Cosmogonies,* and under that the name Orrec Caspro, and under that the name of the printers, Berre and Holaven of Derris Water in Bendraman. On the next page were only the words, "Made in honor and dear remembrance of Melle Aulitta of Caspromant."

I sat down, facing the dark end of the room, for if I couldn't look at it neither could I turn my back on it. I drew the lamp closer to the book and began to read.

I woke there in the grey of early morning, the lamp dead, my head on the open book. I was chilled to the bone. My hands were so stiff I could barely write the letters on the air to leave the room.

I ran to the kitchen and all but crawled into the fireplace trying to get warm. Ista scolded and Sosta chattered but I didn't listen. The great words of the poem were running in my head like waves, like flights of pelicans over the waves. I couldn't hear or see or feel anything but them.

Ista was really worried about me. She gave me a cup of hot milk and said, "Drink this, you fool girl, what are you taking sick for now? With guests in the house? Drink it up!" I drank it and thanked her and went to my room, where I fell on the bed and slept like a stone till late in the morning.

I found Gry and her husband in the stableyard, with the lion and the horses and Gudit and Sosta. Sosta was neglecting her sewing to swoon around Caspro, Gudit was saddling the tall red horse, and Gry and Caspro were arguing. They weren't angry with each other, but they weren't in agreement. Lero was not in their hearts, as we say. "You can't possibly go

there by yourself," Gry was saying, and he was saying, "You can't possibly go there with me," and it was not the first time either had said it.

He turned to me. For a moment I felt almost as swoony as Sosta, thinking that this was the man who had made the poem that I had read all night and that had remade my soul. That confusion went away at once. This was Orrec Caspro all right, only not the poet Caspro but the man Orrec, a worried man arguing with his wife, a man who took everything terribly seriously, our guest, whom I liked. "You can tell us, Memer," he said. "People saw Gry in the marketplace yesterday, saw her with Shetar—hundreds of people—isn't that true?"

"Of course it is," Gry said before I could speak. "But nobody saw inside the wagon! Did they, Memer?"

"Yes," I said to him, and "I don't think so," to her.

"So," she said, "your wife hid in the wagon in the marketplace, and now stays indoors in the house, like a virtuous woman. And your servant the lion trainer emerges from the wagon and comes with you to the Palace."

He was obstinately shaking his head.

"Orrec, I travelled as a man with you for two months all over Asudar! What on earth makes it impossible now?"

"You'll be recognised. They saw you, Gry. They saw you as a woman."

"All unbelievers look alike. And the Alds don't see women, anyhow."

"They see women with lions who frighten their horses!"

"Orrec, I am coming with you."

He was so distressed that she went to him and held him, pleading and reassuring. "You know nobody in Asudar ever saw I was a woman except that old witch at the oasis, and she laughed about it. Remember? They won't know, they won't see, they can't see. I will not let you go alone. I can't. You can't. You need Shetar. And Shetar needs me. Let me go dress now—there's plenty of time. I won't ride, you ride and we'll walk with you, there'll be plenty of time. Won't there, Memer? How far is it to the Palace?"

"Four street crossings and three bridges."

"See? I'll be back in no time. Don't let him go without me!" she said to me and Gudit and Sosta and perhaps to the horse, and she ran off to the back of the house, Shetar loping along with her.

Orrec walked to the gateway of the court and stood there straight and stiff, his back turned to us all. I felt sorry for him.

"Stands to reason," Gudit said. "Murderous snakes they are in that Palace what they call it. Our Council House it was. Get over there, you!" The tall red horse looked at him with mild reproach and moved politely to the left.

"What a beauty you are," I said to the horse, for he was. I patted his neck. "Brandy?"

"Branty," Orrec said, coming back to us with an air of dignified defeat that you could see went right to Sosta's heart.

"Ohhh," she said to Orrec, and then trying to cover it up, "oh, can I, can I get you a . . ." but she couldn't think of anything to get him.

"He's a good old fellow," Orrec said, taking up Branty's reins. He made as if to mount, but Gudit said, "Hold on, wait a minute, have to look to the cinch here," getting between him and the horse and throwing the stirrup up over the saddle.

Orrec gave up, and stood as patiently as the horse.

"Have you had him a long time?" I asked, trying to make conversation and feeling as foolish as Sosta.

"He's well over twenty. Time he had a rest from travelling. And Star as well." He smiled a little sadly. "We left the Uplands together—Branty and me, Star and Gry. And Coaly. Our dog. A good dog. Gry trained her."

That got Gudit started off on the followhounds that used to live at Galvamand and he was still talking about them when Gry reappeared. She wore breeches and a rough tunic. Men in Ansul wear their hair long, tied back, so she had merely combed out her braid and put on a worn black velvet cap. She had somehow darkened or roughened her chin. She had become a fellow of twenty-five or so, quick-eyed, shy, and sullen. "So, are we ready?" she said, and her soft, burry voice had changed, too, becoming hoarse.

Sosta was staring at her, rapt. "Who are you?" she asked.

Gry rolled her eyes and said, "Chy the lion tamer. So, Orrec?"

He gazed at her, shrugged, laughed a little, and swung up onto the horse. "Come on, then!" he said and set right off, not looking back. She and the lion followed behind him. She looked back at me as they passed through the gate, and winked.

“But where did he come from?” Sosta asked.

“Merciful Ennu go with them, that nest of murderous rats and snakes they’re going to,” Gudit said hollowly, shuffling into the stable.

I went in to look after the gods and the ancestors and find out what Ista needed from the market.

Chapter 6

GUDIT TOLD me that a messenger had come that morning from the Council House, which the Alds called the Palace of the Gand, to say Orrec Caspro was to wait upon the Gand before midday. Not saying please or why or anything, of course. So they went, and so we waited. It was late enough when they came back that I'd had plenty of time to worry. I was out sitting on the edge of the dry basin of the Oracle Fountain in front of the house when I saw them coming along our street from the south, Orrec afoot leading the horse, Chy the lion tamer beside him, and the lion padding along behind with a bored expression. I ran to meet them. "It went well, it went well," Orrec said, and Chy said, "Well enough."

Gudit was at the stableyard gate to take Branty—having horses in the stable was such joy to him he wouldn't let anybody else look after them for a moment—and Chy said to me, "Come up with us." In the Master's room, though she hadn't yet changed her clothes or washed her face, she became Gry again. I asked if they were hungry, but they said no, the Gand had given them food and drink. "Did they let you under the roof?" I asked. "Did they let Shetar in?" I didn't want to be curious about anything the Alds did, but I was. Nobody I knew had ever been inside the Council House or the barracks or seen how the Gand and the Alds lived there, for all of Council Hill was always guarded and swarming with soldiers.

"Tell Memer about it while I get out of these clothes," Gry said, and Orrec told me, making a tale of it; he couldn't help it.

The Alds had set up tents as well as barracks, tents of the fashion they use travelling in their deserts. The tent in Council Square was high and very large, as large as a big house, all of red cloth with golden trimming and banners. It appeared, said Orrec, that the Gand actually governed from this tent rather than from the Council House, at least now that the rains had ceased. The tent would be sumptuously furnished, and would have

movable, carved screens making rooms of a kind within it—Orrec had been made welcome in such great tents in his travels in Asudar. But here he was not brought under even that cloth roof. He was invited to sit on a light folding stool on a carpet not far from the open doorway of the tent.

Branty had been taken to the stables by a groom who handled him as if he were made of glass. The lion tamer and the lion stood some yards behind Orrec, with Ald officers guarding them. They, like Orrec, were offered paper parasols to protect them from the sun. “I got one on account of Shetar,” Gry called to us from the dressing room. “They respect lions. But they’ll throw away the parasols, because we used them and we’re unclean.”

They were offered refreshments at once, and a bowl of water was brought for Shetar. After they had waited about half an hour, the Gand emerged from the tent with a retinue of courtiers and officers. He greeted Orrec most graciously, calling him prince of poets and welcoming him to Asudar.

“Asudar!” I burst out. “This is Ansul!” Then I apologised for interrupting.

“Where the Ald is is the desert,” Orrec said mildly; I don’t know whether they were his own words or an Ald saying.

The Gand Ioratth, he said, was a man of sixty or more, splendidly dressed in robes of linen inwoven with gold thread in the fashion of Asudar, with the wide, peaked hat that only Ald noblemen can wear. His manners were affable and his talk was shrewd and lively. He sat with Orrec and conversed about poetry: at first they spoke of the great epics of Asudar, but he also wanted to know about what he called the western makers. His interest was real, his questions intelligent. He invited Orrec to come regularly to the Palace to recite from his own work and that of other makers. It would, he said, give him and his court much pleasure and instruction. He spoke as one prince to another, inviting, not ordering.

Some of the courtiers and officers joined in the conversation after a while, and like the Gand showed a thorough knowledge of their own epics and a curiosity, even a hunger, to hear poetry and story. They complimented Orrec, saying he was a fountain in the desert to them.

Others were less friendly. The Gand’s son, Iddor, kept noticeably apart, paying no attention to the talk about poetry, standing inside the open tent

with a group of priests and officers and chatting with them, until they grew so noisy that the Gand silenced them with a reproof. After that Iddor scowled and said nothing.

The Gand asked that the lion be brought to him, so Chy obliged, and Shetar did her useful trick, as Orrec called it: facing the Gand, she stretched out her front paws and bowed her head down between them, as cats do when they stretch—"doing obeisance." This pleased everybody very much, and Shetar had to do it several times, which was fine with her, since she got a small treat each time, even though it was her fasting day. Iddor came forward and wanted to play with her, dangling his feathered cap, which she ignored, and asking how strong she was, did she kill live prey, had she bitten people, had she killed a man, and so on. Chy the lion tamer answered all his questions respectfully, and had Shetar do obeisance to him. But Shetar yawned at him after doing a rather perfunctory bow.

"An unbeliever should not be permitted to keep a lion of Asudar," Iddor said to his father, who replied, "But who will take the lion from the master of the lion?"—evidently a proverb, neatly applied. At that, Iddor started to tease Shetar, provoking her by shouting and starting at her as if in attack. Shetar ignored him absolutely. The Gand, when he realised what his son was doing, stood up in a rage, told him he was shaming the hospitality of his house and offending the majesty of the lion, and ordered him to leave.

"The majesty of the lion," Gry repeated, sitting down with us at last, her face clean, and dressed now in her silk shirt and trousers—"I like that."

"But I don't like what went on between the Gand and his son," Orrec said. "A snake's nest, as Gudit said. It will take careful treading. The Gand, though, he's a very interesting man."

He's the tyrant that ruined and enslaved us, I thought, but didn't say.

"The Waylord is right," Orrec went on. "The Alds are camped in Ansul like soldiers on the march. They seem amazingly ignorant of how people live here, who they are, what they do. And the Gand is bored with ignorance. I think he's seen that he'll probably finish out his life here and might as well make the best of it. But on the other hand, the people of the city don't know anything about the Alds."

"Why should we?" I said. I couldn't stop myself.

"We say in the Uplands, it takes a mouse to really know the cat," said Gry.

“I don’t want to know people who spit on my gods and call us unclean. I call them filth. Look—look at my lord! Look what they did to him! Do you think he was born with his hands broken?”

“Ah, Memer,” Gry said, and she reached out to me, but I pulled away. I said, “You can go to what they call their palace and eat their food if you like and tell them your poetry, but I’d kill every Ald in Ansul if I could.”

Then I turned away and broke into tears, because I had ruined everything and didn’t deserve their confidence.

I tried to leave the room, but Orrec stopped me.

“Memer, listen,” he said, “listen. Forgive our ignorance. We are your guests. We ask your pardon.”

That brought me out of my stupid crying. I wiped my eyes and said, “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry, sorry,” Gry whispered, and I let her take my hand and sit down with me on the windowseat. “We know so little. Of you, of your lord, of Ansul. But I know as you do that we were brought together here by more than chance.”

“By Lero,” I said.

“By a horse, and a lion, and Lero,” she said. “I will trust you, Memer.”

“I will trust you,” I said to them both.

“Tell us who you are, then. We need to know one another! Tell us who the Waylord is—or what he was, before the Alds came. Was he the lord of the city?”

“We didn’t have any lords.”

I tried to pull myself together to answer properly, as I did when the Waylord asked me, “A little further, please, Memer?” I said, “We elected a council to govern the city. All the cities on the Ansul Coast did. The citizens voted for the councillors. And the councils named the waylords. Waylords travelled among the cities and arranged trade so that the towns and the cities got what they needed from each other. And they kept merchants from cheating and usury, if they could.”

“It’s not a hereditary title, then?”

I shook my head. “You were a waylord for ten years. And ten more if your council named you again. Then somebody else took over. Anybody could be a waylord. But you had to have money of your own or from your city. You had to entertain the merchants and the factors and the other

waylords, and travel all the time—even down into Sundraman, to talk with the silk merchants and the government there. It cost a lot. But Galvamand was a rich house, then. And people of the city helped. It was an honor, a great honor, being a waylord. So we still call him that. In honor. Although it means nothing now."

I almost broke out in tears again. My weakness, my lack of control, scared me and made me angry, and the anger helped steady me.

"All that was before I was born. I only know it because people have told me and I've read the histories."

Then my breath went out of me as if I had been hit in the stomach, and I sat paralysed. The habit of my lifetime had hold of me: I should not speak of reading, I should never say to anyone outside my household that I had read something in a book.

But Orrec and Gry, of course, didn't even notice. To them it was perfectly natural. They nodded. They asked me to go on.

I wasn't sure what I should and should not tell them, now. "People like me are called siege brats," I said. I pulled at my pale, fine, crinkly hair. I wanted them to know what I was but I didn't want to speak of my mother being raped. "You can see . . . When the Alds took the city. That was when . . . But we drove them out again, and kept them out almost a year. We can fight. We don't make wars, but we can fight. But then the new army came from Asudar, twice as many men, and broke into the city. And they took the Waylord to prison and wrecked Galvamand. They tore down the university and threw the books into the canals and the sea. They drowned people in the canals and stoned them to death and buried them alive. The Waylord's mother, Eleyo Galva—"

She had lived in this room. She had been here when the soldiers broke into the house. I could not go on.

We were all silent.

Shetar paced by, lashing her tail. I reached out to her, to get away from what I'd been talking about, but she ignored me. Her mouth was half open and she looked somehow more lionish than usual.

"She'll be in a bad mood all night," Gry said. "She got those rewards, at the Palace, and it reminded her that she hasn't had a meal."

"What does she eat?"

"Hapless goat, mostly," Orrec said.

“Can she ever hunt?”

“She doesn’t really know how,” Gry said. “Her mother would have taught her. Halflions hunt in a clan, like wolves. That’s why she tolerates us. We’re her family.”

Shetar made a long, groaning, growling, singsong remark and paced down the long room again.

“Memer, if it isn’t too hard for you to talk about it?” Orrec began, and when I shook my head—“You said they destroyed the library of the university? Entirely?” I could tell he hoped I would deny it.

“The soldiers tried to tear down the library building, but it was stone and well built, so they broke the windows and wrecked the rooms, and brought the books out. They didn’t want to touch them, they made citizens carry them and load them on carts and haul them to the canal and dump them in. There were so many books they piled up on the bottom of the canal and began to choke it, so they made people cart them down to the harbor. And unload the books and dump them off the piers. If they didn’t sink right away they pushed people into the water after them. Once I saw a —” but this time I managed to stop myself, before I said that I had seen a book that had been salvaged from the sea.

It was in the secret room now, one of the northern scrollbooks, written on coated linen and rolled around wooden rods. The person who had found it cast up on the beach dried it out and brought it here. Though it had been weeks in the water, the beautiful writing could still be read. The Waylord showed it to me when he was working on it to restore the damaged text.

But I could not talk about the books, the old books or the rescued books, in the secret room. Not even to Gry and Orrec.

It was safe, I hoped, to talk about ancient times, and I said, “The university used to be here, long ago, in Galvamand.”

Orrec asked, and I told him what I knew, mostly as I had heard it from the Waylord, of the four great households of the city of Ansul: Cam, Gelb, Galva, Actamo. From earliest times they were the wealthiest families, with the most power in the Council. They built the finest houses and temples, paid for public rites and festivals, and gathered artists and makers, scholars and philosophers, architects and musicians to live and work in their houses. That was when people began to call the city Ansul the Wise and Beautiful.

The Galvas had always lived here on the first rise of the hill above the river and the harbor, in the Oracle House.

“There was an oracle here?” Orrec asked.

I hesitated. I had given little thought to what the word meant until yesterday, the morning of the day Gry and Orrec came, as I stood by the dry basin of the fountain—the Oracle Fountain.

“I don’t know,” I said. I started to say more, and did not. It was strange. Why had I never wondered why Galvamand was called the Oracle House? I did not even know what the oracle was, yet knew I must not speak of it—the way I knew, had always known, that I must not speak of the secret room. It was as if a hand was laid across my lips.

I thought then of what the Waylord had said last night, “The hands of all the givers of dreams were on my mouth.” That frightened me.

They saw that I was confused and tongue-tied. Orrec changed the subject, asking about the house, and soon got me to telling its story again.

In those old days, the Galvas prospered, and both the house and the household grew, drawing to it people of art and learning and craft, and especially scholars and makers of poetry and tales. People came from all Ansul and even from other lands to hear them, learn from them, work with them. So over the years the university grew up here at Galvamand. All this back part of the house, both the upper and lower floors, had been apartments and classrooms and workrooms and libraries; there had been other buildings off the outer courts; and houses farther back on the hilltop had been hostels and domiciles for students and masters, workshops for artists and builders.

The poet Denios came here from Urdile when he was a young man. Maybe he had studied in the gallery where we sat last night, for that had been part of the Library of Galvamand.

In the course of time, Luck, the god we call the Deaf One, turned away from the households of Cam, Gelb, and Actamo. As their wealth and well-being declined, their rivalry with Galva became rancorous. Partly in spite and envy, though they called it public spirit, they persuaded the Council to claim the university and its library for the city, taking it away from Galvamand. The Galvas accepted the ruling of the Council, though they warned that the old site was a sacred one and the new site might not be so blessed. The city built new buildings for the university down nearer the

harbor. Almost all the great library that had been gathered here over the centuries was moved there. And I told Gry and Orrec what the Waylord had told me: “When they began to take the books out of Galvamand, the Oracle Fountain in the forecourt began to fail. Little by little, as the books were taken out of the house, the water ceased to run. When they were done, it dried up entirely. It hasn’t run for two hundred years . . .”

They opened the new university with ceremonies and festivals, and students and scholars came; but it was never so famous, so much visited, as the old Library of Galvamand. And then after two centuries the desert people came and tore down the stones, dumped the books into the canals and the sea, buried them in the mud.

Orrec listened to my story with his head in his hands.

“Nothing was left here at Galvamand?” Gry asked.

“Some books,” I said uncomfortably. “But when the siege was broken the Ald soldiers came here right away, even before they went to the university. Looking for that . . . that place they believe in. They tore out the wooden parts of the house, and took the books, the furnishings—Whatever they found they took.” I was telling the truth, but I had a strong sense that Gry was aware that it wasn’t the whole truth.

“This is terrible—terrible,” Orrec said, standing up. “I know the Alds think writing is an evil thing—but to destroy—to waste—” He was grieved and upset beyond words. He strode off down the room and stood at the western windows, where over the roofs of Galvamand and the lower city white Sul floated on the mist above the straits.

Gry went to Shetar and clipped the leash to her collar. “Come on,” she said softly to me. “She needs a walk.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, following her, despairing again at having so distressed Orrec. Everything I said was wrong. It was a day without Ennu, without any blessing.

“Was it you that destroyed the books?”

“No. But I wish—”

“If wishes were horses!” said Gry. “Tell me, is there anywhere I could let Shetar off the leash to run? She won’t attack if I’m anywhere near her, but it’s less worrisome to let her go where there aren’t people around.”

“The old park,” I said, and we went there. It is just above and east of the house, a broad gully in the hillside over the river where the Embankments

divide it into the four canals. Trees grow thick on the slopes of the old park. The Alds never go there; they don't like trees. Nobody much goes there except children hunting rabbits or quail to get a bit of meat for their family.

I showed Gry what they call Denios' Fountain, near the entrance, and Shetar had a long drink from the basin.

There was not a soul about, and Gry let the lion off the leash. She bounded off, but not far, and kept coming back to us. Evidently she didn't much like the trees either, and didn't want to go far into the thick, neglected undergrowth. She spent a long time sharpening her claws on one tree, then another, and sniffed exhaustively on the tracks of some creature all round a great thicket of brambles. The farthest she got from us was in pursuit of a butterfly, which led her leaping and batting at it down a steep dark path. After she'd been out of sight around a bend for a while, Gry gave a little purring call. In a moment the lion reappeared, loping up at us through the shadows. Gry touched Shetar's head, and she followed us as we started wandering slowly back up through the woods.

"What a wonderful gift," I said, "to be able to call animals to you."

"Depends on what you use it for," Gry said. "It certainly came in handy when we came down out of the Uplands and had to make a living. I trained horses while Orrec got his learning. I like that work . . . I admire the way the Alds train their horses. For them, beating your horse is worse than beating your wife." She gave a little snort.

"How could you stand living in Asudar so long? Weren't you—didn't you get angry at them?"

"I didn't have the cause for anger you have," she said. "It was a little like living with wild animals—predators. They're dangerous, and not reasonable, by our standards. They make life hard. I felt sorry for the Ald men."

I said nothing.

"They're like stallions or buck rabbits," she went on, reflectively. "Never a moment they're not anxious about a rival male, or a female getting loose. They're never free. They fill their world with enemies . . . But they're brave, and keep their word, and honor the guest. Like my people of the Uplands. I liked them well enough. I couldn't get to

know any women, though, because I was pretending to be a man and had to keep away from them. That was tiresome."

"I hate everything about them," I said. "I can't help it."

"Of course you can't help it. What you've told us—how could you see them except as hateful?"

"I don't want to see them any other way," I said.

I don't believe Gry ever didn't hear what people said, but sometimes she ignored it. She walked on a little and then turned to me on the path with a sudden grin. "Listen, Memer! Why don't you come with us to the Palace? Second groom. You make a fine boy. Fooled me completely. Would you like to? It's interesting. The Gand's a kind of king, how many chances do you get to meet a king? And you can hear Orrec—he's going to tell them the *Cosmogonies*. That could be risky, they're so stuck on Atth being the one and only god. But the Gand was asking him for it yesterday."

I only shook my head. I longed to hear Orrec speak that poem, but not among a lot of Alds. I wouldn't say any more about how I hated them, but I certainly wasn't going to go be polite and meek and slavish to them.

After dinner the next day, though, Gry brought up the idea again. Evidently she had talked Orrec into it, for he made no objection; and to my dismay, the Waylord didn't either. He asked how dangerous they thought it might be. When they both said they trusted the Alds' law of hospitality, he said only, "The hospitality they showed me wasn't of a kind I want Memer to know. But that our people and theirs know so little of one another, after so many years—that is shameful. For us as well as for them." He looked at me thoughtfully. "And Memer is a very quick learner."

I wanted to protest, to say I refused to go anywhere near the Alds, I didn't want to learn anything from them or about them. But that would be wilful ignorance, a thing the Waylord despised. And also it would sound like cowardice. If Orrec and Gry were willing to risk going to the Palace, how could I refuse?

The idea was more frightening the more I thought about it. Yet I was curious about the Palace, the Alds, as Orrec and Gry talked about them. Everything had been the same in my life for so long that I'd wondered if it would always be the same—the housework, the market; the empty rooms of Galvamand, the secret room and its treasures of reading and learning, and the dark strange part of it where I dared not go; no one to teach me

anything new but my dear lord, no one but him to be with, to give my love to. Now by the coming of two people the house had come alive. The ancestors were awake, were listening—the souls, the shadows, and the guardians of sill and hearth. The One Who Looks Both Ways had opened the door. I knew that. I knew that our guests had come on the path of Ennu and with Lero's blessing, and that to refuse what they offered me was to refuse the gift, the chance, the turning of the way.

"Do you want to go, Memer?" the Waylord asked me. I knew if I protested he wouldn't insist. I shrugged, not even speaking, as if it were a matter of no importance to me if I went or not.

He looked at me searchingly. Why did he agree to send me among our enemies? And I saw why: because I could go where he could not. Even if I was a coward, I could carry his courage. He was asking me to play my part as the heir of our house.

"Yes, I'll go," I said.

That night for the first time in my life I dreamed of the man who was my father. He wore the blue cloak the soldiers wear. His hair was like mine, a dun, dull, crinkly mass too fine to comb, sheep hair. I could not see his face. He was climbing, clambering hastily over ruins, broken walls and stones, such as our city was full of. I stood in the street watching him. As he passed he looked straight at me. I could not see his face clearly, but I thought it was not a man's face but a lion's. He looked away again and climbed over a ruined wall, hurrying, as if pursued.

Chapter 7

WHEN ORREC Caspro set off the next time to entertain the Gand of the Alds of Ansul, his retinue was Chy the lion tamer, Shetar the lion, and Mem the groom.

Mem was anxious and uneasy. What if the Alds asked me to unsaddle Branty, or tried to talk groom-talk with me? They'd know in a moment that I didn't know a hock from a pastern. No fear, said Gry, they were just like Gudit, they wouldn't allow a strange boy in their stables with their prized horses. Anyhow, she'd keep me right beside her when we were at the Palace. All I had to do as Mem was walk through the streets at Branty's head, groom fashion, as if Orrec needed help managing his horse.

So I did that, feeling foolish and quite frightened. Branty was a comfort to me. He walked along, his shod hoofs ringing loud and regular on our stone-paved streets, his big head nodding up and down beside me, ears flicking forward and back; now and then he blew air out his nostrils. His big, dark eye had a kind look in it. He was old—older than I was—and had travelled over all the Western Shore. Where Orrec asked him to go he went with a noble patience. I wished I was like him.

We followed Galva Street up the low hill from Goldsmiths' Bridge to the square before the Council House. I looked at that building with a swell of pride. It is broad and tall, built of silvery-grey stone, with rows of high, delicate windows. Its dome of copper rises lightly above all the roofs of the city as Sul floats above the lower mountains. Steps go up from the great square to the terrace in front of the doors, where people used to make speeches and debate, when we governed ourselves. The Waylord had told me the terrace was so constructed that if you stood in front of the central doors and spoke only a little louder than usual your voice could be heard all over the square. But I'd never been up those steps; I'd never even walked on the square before. It belonged to the Alds, not the citizens.

In the middle of it stood the huge tent with its red peaks and long red banners flying from the poles, almost hiding the Council House.

An officer came to meet us as we approached the entrance to the square and ordered the blue-cloaked guards to let us pass.

Men came to meet us from the stables, off to the left of the square. I held Branty while Orrec dismounted, and an elderly Ald took the reins from me and with a little *tck-tck* to Branty led him away. Chy the lion tamer came up next to me, with Shetar short-leashed, and we followed Orrec across the pavement. There was a carpet in front of the tent and a folding chair and a parasol for Orrec; no seats for us, but a little boy, a siege brat, a slave, handed Chy a parasol of red paper. We stood behind Orrec. Chy at once gave me the parasol to hold over the three of us, and stood with arms folded in a lofty posture. I saw that this would make sense to the Alds, who would see me as Chy's or Orrec's slave.

The Alds' slaves here at their court all wore a robe or tunic of coarse striped cloth, grey and white or dun and white. Some were Alds and some my countrymen. They were all men or boys. The women would be kept elsewhere, indoors, hidden. And none of them would be Alds.

Various courtiers in various kinds of finery came out of the tent, and several officers came up from the barracks which the Alds built above the East Canal behind the Council House, where our voting booths used to be. When at last the Gand came out of the big tent, everybody stood up. Two Ald slaves followed him; one held a huge red parasol over his head, while the other held a fan in case the Gand needed to be cooled off. It was a mild spring day, the sun mostly veiled by light clouds, a soft sea wind blowing. Seeing the slaves stand there with their silly equipment I thought how stupid the Alds were—couldn't they look around and see they didn't need parasols, or fans, or the wide-brimmed hats the courtiers wore? Couldn't they see this wasn't the desert?

Imitating the behavior of the Ald slaves, I didn't look directly at the Gand Ioratth, but stole glances. He had a heavy, seamed face, sallow like most Alds, with a short hawk nose and narrow eyes. The Alds' pale eyes always make me queasy, and I've thanked my ancestors many times for letting me have the dark eyes of my people. The Gand's sheep hair was short and grey, frizzing out under his hat; his eyebrows frizzed out too, and a short rim of close-cut grey beard followed his jawline. He looked tough

and tired. He greeted Orrec with a smile that lightened his face and a gesture I had never seen any Ald make, opening out his hands from his heart in welcome with a bow of his head. It seemed a greeting to an equal. And he called Orrec “Gand of the Makers.”

But he won’t let him under his roof, I thought.

“Heathen,” they called us. A word we learned from them. If it meant anything, it meant people who don’t know what’s sacred. Are there any such people? “Heathen” is merely a word for somebody who knows a different sacredness than you know. The Alds had been here seventeen years and still hadn’t learned that the sea, the earth, the stones of Ansul are sacred, are alive with divinity. If anybody was heathen it was them, not us, I thought. So I stood stewing in my resentment and not listening to what the men said, Ioratth and Orrec, the two princes, the tyrant and the poet.

Orrec began to recite, and the viol of his voice woke me to hearing; but it was some Ald poem the Gand had asked for, one of their endless epics about wars in the desert, and I wouldn’t listen.

I looked among the courtiers for the Gand’s son Iddor, the one who had teased Shetar. He was easy enough to pick out. He wore a lot of finery, with feathers and cloth-of-gold ribbons on his fancy hat. He looked a good deal like his father, but was taller and handsomer, although very light-skinned. He was restless, always talking to a companion, fidgeting, gesturing, moving his body. The old Gand sat unmoving, intent on the story, his linen robe falling as if carved of stone, his short, hard hands spread on his thighs. And most of his officers listened as intently as he did, drinking in the words. Orrec’s voice sang with passion, and I began hearing the story in spite of myself.

When he stopped, after a tragic scene of betrayal and reconciliation, the hearers all applauded by hitting their palms together. The Gand had a slave bring Orrec water in a glass. (“They’ll break it, afterwards,” Chy murmured to me.) Plates of sweets were offered about, not to Chy or me. Ioratth leaned forward holding out a morsel of something to Shetar. Chy led her forward. She sat down, sniffed the candy politely, and looked away. The Gand laughed. He had a pleasant laugh that creased his whole face. “Not food for a lion, eh, Lady Shetar?” he said. “Shall I send for some meat?”

Chy, not Orrec, answered him, gruff and brief: “Better not, sir.”

The Gand was not offended. “You keep her to a diet, eh? Yes, yes. Will she do her bow again?”

I could not see that Chy moved or did anything, but the lion stood up and did a deep cat stretch in front of the Gand. While he laughed, she looked round for the little ball of bone marrow that was her reward, and Chy slipped it into her mouth.

Iddor had come forward and said now to Orrec, “What did you pay for her?”

“I got her for a song, Gand Iddor,” Orrec said. He spoke still seated; he was tuning his lyre, an excuse for not rising. Iddor scowled. Orrec looked up from the instrument and said, “For a tale, more truly. The nomads who had the cub and her mother wanted to hear the whole tale of *Daredar* told, so they’d know more of it to tell at their shows. I told it for the three nights it takes to tell, and for that my reward was the lion cub. We were all well satisfied.”

“How do you know that tale? How did you learn our songs?”

“I hear a tale or a song, and it’s mine,” Orrec said. “That’s my gift.”

“That and the making of songs,” said Ioratth.

Orrec bowed his head.

“But where did you hear them?” the Gand’s son insisted. “Where did you hear *Daredar* told?”

“I travelled in northern Asudar, Gand Iddor. Everywhere the people gave me their songs and stories, telling and singing, sharing their wealth with me. They didn’t ask for payment, not a lion cub, not even a copper penny —only a new song or an old tale retold. The poorest people of the desert are most generous in word and heart.”

“True, true,” the elder Gand said.

“Did you read our songs? Have you put them in books?” Iddor spat out the words “read” and “books” as if they were turds in his mouth.

“Prince, among the people of Atth I live by the law of Atth.” Orrec spoke not only with dignity but fiercely, a man whose honor has been challenged answering the challenge.

Iddor turned away, daunted either by Orrec’s direct response or by his father’s glare. He said, however, to one of his companions, “Is it a man, then, playing that fiddle? I thought it was a woman.”

Among the Alds, only women play the plucked and bowed instruments of music, and only men the flutes and horns—so Gry told me later. All I understood then was that Iddor wanted to insult Orrec, or wanted to flout his father, and insulting Orrec was a way to do that.

"When you are refreshed, Maker, we should like to hear you speak verse of your own making," Ioratth said, "if you will forgive and enlighten our ignorance of the poetry of the west."

It surprised me that the Gand spoke so formally and elaborately. He was an old soldier, no doubt about that, and yet everything he said was measured, even flowery, with archaic words and turns of phrase, pleasant to hear. It was the way you might expect a people to speak who shunned writing and made all their art of words aloud. Until now I had hardly heard an Ald say anything, only shout orders.

Orrec was quite able to give as good as he got in polite exchange as well as verbal duelling. Earlier, reciting from the *Daredar* epic, he had laid aside his northern accent and spoke like an Ald, blurring the harsher consonants and stretching out the vowels. Answering the Gand now he kept that softness. "I am the last and least of that line of makers, Gand," he said, "and it is not in my heart to put myself before far greater men. Will you and your court permit me to say, rather than my own verses, a poem of the beloved maker of Urdile, Denios?"

The Gand nodded. Orrec finished tuning his lyre, explaining as he did so that the poem was not sung, but that the voice of the instrument served to set the poetry apart from all words said before and after it, and also to say, sometimes, what no words could. Then he bowed his head to the lyre and struck the strings. The notes were plangent, clear, impassioned. The last chord died away, and he spoke the first words of the first canto of *The Transformations*.

Nobody moved till he was done. And they were silent for a long moment afterwards, just as the crowd in the marketplace had been. Then they were about to clap their hands in praise, but the Gand held up his hand in a sudden gesture— "No," he said. "Again, Maker! If you will, speak us this marvel once again!"

Orrec looked a little taken aback, but he smiled and bowed his head to the lyre.

Before he touched the strings a man spoke loudly. It was not Iddor but one who stood near him among his troop: he wore a red-and-black robe and a red headdress that came down straight, boxlike, from a high red hat to his shoulders, hiding his head and leaving only his face visible. His beard had been singed off, leaving a burnt frizz along his chin. He carried a long, heavy, black stick as well as a short sword. “Son of the Sun,” he said, “is not once enough and more than enough to hear this blasphemy?”

“Priest,” Chy whispered to me. I knew he was a priest, though we didn’t see them often. Redhats, we called them, and hoped never to see them, for when a citizen was to be stoned to death or buried alive down in the mudflats, it was the redhats who did it.

Ioratth turned to look at the priest. It was like the turn of a hawk’s head, a quick, how-dare-you frown. But he spoke mildly. “Most Blessed of Atth,” he said, “my ears are dull. I heard no blasphemy. I beg you to open my understanding.”

The man in the red headdress spoke with great assurance. “These are godless words, Gand Ioratth. There is in them no knowledge of Atth, no belief in the revelations of his sacred interpreters. It is all blind worship of demons and false gods, talk of base earthly doings, and praise of women.”

“Ah, ah,” Ioratth said, nodding, not contradicting but not seeming shaken by this denunciation. “It is true that the heathen poets are ignorant of Atth and his Burnt Ones. They perceive darkly and in error, yet let us not call them blind. The fire of revelation may yet come to them. Meanwhile, we who were forced to leave our wives long years ago, do you begrudge even our hearing a word about women? You the Blessed, the Fire-Burnt, are above pollution, but we are only soldiers. To hear is not to have, but it gives some comfort none the less.” He was perfectly solemn saying this, but some of the men about him grinned.

The man in the headdress began to reply, but the Gand abruptly stood up. “In respect for the sacred purity of the Fire-Burnt,” he said, “I will not ask the Blessed Rudde or his brothers to stay and listen longer to words that offend their ears. And any other man who does not wish to hear the heathen poet’s songs may go. Since only he is cursed who hears the curse, as they say, those who have dull ears, like me, may stay and listen safely. Maker, forgive our disputes and our discourtesy.”

He sat down again. Iddor and the redhats—there were four of them—and the rest of Iddor's group all went back into the great tent, talking loudly, discontented. One man who stood near Ioratth also slunk away as unnoticeably as he could, looking anxious and unhappy. The rest stayed. And Orrec struck the lyre, and spoke the opening of *The Transformations* again.

The Gand let his people applaud at the end, this time. He had another glass of water brought to Orrec ("Fortune in crystal," Chy hissed to me), and then he dismissed his retinue, saying that he wished to speak with the poet "beneath the fern-palm," which evidently meant in private.

A couple of guards remained standing at the tent entrance, but the officers and courtiers went back into the big tent or to the barracks, and Chy and I were dismissed by the officious slave with the fan. We went to the stable side of the courtyard, following several men who, I realised now, had come from the stables or elsewhere to hear the poetry and had been standing all along unobtrusively on the fringe of the group. Some were soldiers, others hostlers, a couple of them were boys. Most of them were interested in Shetar. They wanted to get closer to her than Chy would let them get. They tried to strike up conversation, asking all the usual questions—what's her name, where did you get her, what does she eat, has she killed anybody. Chy's answers were curt and haughty, as befitted a lion tamer.

"Is he your slave?" a young man asked. I didn't realise he was talking about me until Chy answered, "Prentice groom."

The young man fell into step with me, and when I reached the shady wall and sat down on the cobbles, he sat down too. He looked at me several times and finally said, "You're an Ald."

I shook my head.

"Your dad was," he said, looking very shrewd.

What was the use denying it, with my hair, my face? I shrugged.

"You live here? In the city?"

I nodded.

"Do you know any girls?"

My heart went up into my throat. All I could think was that he'd seen I was a girl, that he'd start shouting about pollution, defilement, blasphemy —

“I came here from Dur with my dad last year,” he said in a depressed tone, and then said nothing for a while.

Sneaking a longer glance at him I saw that he was a boy rather than a man, fifteen, sixteen at most. He didn’t wear the blue cloak, but a tunic with a blue knot at the shoulder. He was bare-legged, big-boned, pale-skinned, with a soft face and pimples around his mouth. His frizz of sheep hair was yellowish. He sighed. “The Ansul girls all hate us,” he said. “I thought maybe you had a sister.”

I shook my head.

“What’s your name?”

“Mem.”

“Well, look, Mem, if you knew some girls who, you know, just wanted to be with some men for a while, I have some money. For you, I mean.”

He was graceless, detestable, and pitiful. He didn’t even sound hopeful. I didn’t make any answer at all. For all my fear and contempt of him, he made me want to laugh—I don’t know why—he was so shameless. Like a dog. I couldn’t actually hate him.

He went on about girls, just talking about his daydreams I suppose, and began to say some things that made me feel myself getting red in the face and restless. I said in a flat voice, “I don’t know any girls.” That shut him up for a while. He sighed and scratched his groin and finally said, “I hate it here. I want to go home.”

Then go! I wanted to shout at him. I just said, “Hunh.”

He looked at me again, so closely that it scared me all over again. “Do you ever go with boys?” he asked.

I shook my head.

“I never have either,” he said in his sad, monotonous voice, which was no deeper than mine. “Some of the fellows do.” The idea seemed to depress him so much that he said nothing more, until he said, “Father would kill me.”

I nodded.

We sat in silence. Shetar was pacing up and down the courtyard with Chy in attendance. I wanted to be with them, but thought it would look odd if an apprentice groom walked up and down with the lion and the lion tamer.

“What do fellows do here?” the boy asked.

I shrugged. What did boys do? Scrounged for food and firewood, mostly, like everybody else in my city except the Alds. “Play stickball,” I said finally.

He looked more depressed. Evidently he was not the game-playing type.

“What’s so strange here,” he said, “there’s women everywhere. Out in the open. Women all over the place, but you can’t . . . They don’t . . .”

“Aren’t there any women in Asudar?” I asked, playing stupid.

“Of course there’s women. Only they aren’t outside, all over the place,” he said in an aggrieved, accusing tone. “They aren’t always around where you see them all the time. Our women don’t go flaunting around in the street. They stay home where they belong.”

I thought then of my mother, in the street, trying to get home.

A great, hot rage rose up through my body and if I had spoken then it would have been a curse, or I would have spat in his face; but I didn’t speak, and the rage slowly died away to a cold, hollow sickness. I swallowed my saliva and willed myself to be calm.

“Mekke says there’s temple whores,” the boy said. “Anybody could go there. Only the temples were shut down, of course. So they do it in secret somewhere. But they still have them. They do it with anybody. You know anything about that?”

I shook my head.

He sighed.

Very carefully, I stood up. I needed to move, but move slowly.

“My name’s Simme,” he said, looking up at me with a squinting smile, like a child.

I nodded. I moved slowly away—towards Shetar and Chy, for I did not know anywhere else to go. The blood was singing in my ears.

Chy looked me over and said, “The Gand’s about done talking, I think. Go to the stables and ask them to bring the maker’s horse out. Say you want to walk him. All right?”

I nodded and went round into the great stable courtyard. For some reason I was no longer afraid of the men there. I asked after the maker’s horse, and they took me to Branty’s stall. Branty was playing with a taste of oats. “Have him saddled and brought out,” I said, as if they were slaves and I a master. The old man who had taken him from me at first went to obey my orders. I stood with my hands behind my back, looking over the

beautiful horses in the long line of stalls. When the old man brought Branty out, I took his bridle without hesitation.

“He’d be about nineteen or twenty?”

“Older,” I said, with the same assurance.

“Good blood,” the old man said. He reached up to part Branty’s forelock with thick, dirty, gentle fingers. “I like big horses,” he said.

I gave a brief nod of approval, and walked away with Branty. Chy and Shetar were just at the entrance to the stable court, and Orrec was coming towards us. I gave him a knee up to mount, and we set off sedately for home. As we went out through the gateway of the Council Square, past the Ald guards in blue cloaks, I was overcome suddenly by tears, they burst hot from my eyes, my mouth quivered and jerked. I went walking on, seeing my city, my beautiful city and the far mountain over the straits and the cloud-swept sky through tears, until they ceased.

Chapter 8

ISTA MADE one of her special dishes that night, what we call uffu, pastries stuffed with a bit of ground lamb or kid, potatoes, greens, and herbs, and fried in oil. They were crisp, greasy, delicious. Ista was grateful to Orrec and Gry not only because they had provided meat for the kitchen—we were sharing Shetar's dinner, is the fact of it—but because they were our guests, restoring honor and dignity to the house by their presence, and giving her somebody new to cook for. They complimented the uffu, while she shrugged and growled and criticised her pastry for being tough. Can't get decent oil, she said, like we had in the good days.

After dinner the Waylord took our guests and me to the back gallery, and again we sat and talked. Three of us were very curious to know what the Gand Ioratth had said to Orrec beneath the fern-palm. And Orrec was ready to tell us. He had news indeed.

Dorid, Gand of Gands, high priest and king of Asudar and commander of the Ald armies for nearly thirty years, was dead. He had died of a seizure over a month ago in his palace in the desert city Medron. His successor was a man named Acray, his nephew, or so called. Since the kings of Asudar were high priests, and priests of Atth were officially celibate, a king couldn't officially have a son, only nephews. Other nephews or claimants to the throne contested Acray's succession and had been killed in uprisings or behind the scenes. Medron had been in turmoil for some time, but by now Acray had seized firm hold of power as the Gand of Gands of all Asudar.

And this was evidently much to the Gand Ioratth's liking. From what he said, Orrec gathered that the new priest-king was less the priest and more the king than Dorid had been. The palace factions that had tried to keep Acray from the throne were, like Dorid, followers of the cult of the

Thousand True Men—those who had declared a war of good against evil, urging the invasion of heathen Ansul to find and destroy the Night Mouth.

Acray's followers, it seemed, didn't put much stock in the existence of the Night Mouth, especially since the invading army had never been able to find it. They considered the occupation of Ansul, though it had brought some profit and luxury goods to Medron, as a drain on the resources of the Ald army and also a spiritually questionable enterprise. For the Alds were a race apart, dwelling in their desert, singularly favored by their single god. They had always kept clear of the pollution of the unbelievers. To continue to live among the heathen was to risk their souls.

What should the Alds in Ansul do, then?

Ioratth, considering these matters aloud to Orrec, had spoken remarkably plainly. The question, as he saw it, was which would be more pleasing to Atth: should the new Gand of Gands recall his soldiers home to Asudar with all the loot they could bring, or should he send settlers to colonise Ansul permanently?

"He put it just about like that," Orrec said. "Evidently the new ruler has asked Ioratth for his opinion, as a man who's lived all these years here among the heathen. And Ioratth sees me as disinterested, an impartial observer. But why does he see me so? And why does he trust me with his damned indecisions? I'm a heathen myself!"

"Because you're a maker," the Waylord said. "Therefore, to the Alds, a truth-speaker and a seer."

"Maybe he has nobody else he can talk to," Gry said. "And whether or not you're a seer, you certainly are a good listener."

"A silent one," Orrec said, with some bitterness. "What can I say to all this?"

"I don't know what you can say to Ioratth," the Waylord said. "But it may help you to know what little I know about him. In the first place, he took a woman of Ansul as a slave, a concubine, but it's said he treats her honorably. Her name is Tirio Actamo. She's the daughter of a great family. I knew her before the invasion. She was a beautiful, clever, spirited girl. All I know of her now is servants' gossip brought to me by others, but the gossip is that Ioratth honors her as a wife, and that she has great influence on him."

"I wish I could talk with her!" Gry said.

“So do I,” the Waylord said, and his voice was wry and melancholy. After a pause he went on. “Iddor is the Gand’s son by a wife back in Asudar. They say Iddor hates Tirio Actamo. They also say he hates his father.”

“He taunts and defies him,” Orrec said, “but seems to obey him.”

The Waylord sat silent for a while, then got up, went over to the god-niche, and stood before it. “Blessed spirits of this house,” he murmured, “help me speak truly.” He bowed his head and touched the worn sill of the niche, stood a moment longer, and came back to us. He spoke standing.

“It was Iddor and the priests who led the soldiers here to find their Night Mouth. They tortured the people of the house to make them reveal the entrance to the cave or sewer or whatever the Night Mouth might be. Some died in torture. The Alds kept me alive. They had—” he halted a moment and then went on, “they had the most hope of me, since they perceived me as a witch. A priest, in their terms, but a priest of their anti-god. But I wasn’t able to tell them what they wanted to know. Ennu laid her hand on my mouth and would not let me lie. Sampa stopped my tongue and would not let me speak the truth. All the souls of Galvamand came round me. The priests knew it. They were afraid of me, even while they . . . Not afraid of me but of the sacredness that came into me, the gathering of souls around me, the blessing of the gods and spirits of my house, my city, my land.

“After a while the priests didn’t want to have anything to do with me, so Iddor himself was my only questioner. He feared me too, I think, but also he prided himself on his daring, since he believed me a great sorcerer and yet he could do what he liked with me. I proved his power, by being a toy for his cruelty. I had to listen to him. He talked and talked, always explaining to me, telling me over and over how the demon that filled me would come forth at last and tell him where to find the Night Mouth. When the demon came forth and spoke I would be allowed to die. All evil would die. Righteousness would rule the earth, and he, Iddor, would sit by the throne of the King of Kings, burning in glory. He talked and talked. I tried to lie to him, and I tried to tell him the truth. But they would not let me.”

He had not sat down as he spoke, and now he went back to the god-niche, put his hands on the sill of it, and stood there in silence a while. I

heard him whisper blessing on Ennu and the house-gods. Then he turned to us again.

"All that time, all the time Iddor held me prisoner, I never saw his father. Ioratth kept away from the prison cells and had no part in the witch hunts. Iddor constantly complained to me about his father, railed at him, saying he was impious, contemptuous of priests and prophecies, and flouted the order of the Gand of Gands to find the Night Mouth. 'I obey my god and my king, he does not,' he said. But in the end, whether at Ioratth's order or not, I was let go. The hunts for caves and demons died down. Now and then Iddor or the priests would raise up a scare, finding a book to destroy or a scholar to torture. Ioratth let them do it, I suppose to satisfy the Gand of Gands that the quest was still going on. He had to walk carefully, since his son was of the king's party and he was not.

"But now, it looks as if Ioratth has a king of his own kind, and the power Iddor and the priests had will be suddenly reduced. This could be a dangerous moment."

He sat down with us again. Though he had spoken painfully, he did not seem troubled now, only grave and weary; and as he looked around at us, a gentleness came into his face, as if, returned from a journey, he saw people he loved.

"Dangerous because . . . ," Gry said, and Orrec finished her half question: "Because Iddor, seeing his faction losing power, might try to seize power?"

The Waylord nodded. "I wonder where the Ald soldiers stand on this," he said. "No doubt they'd like to go home to Asudar. But they respect their priests. If Iddor defied his father, and the priests were with Iddor, which of them would the soldiers obey?"

"We can do some listening at the Palace," Gry said. She glanced at me, I didn't know why.

"There's another element of danger, or hope, or both," the Waylord said, "which I tell you of, asking you for your silence. There's a group of people who hope to rouse Ansul against the Alds. A group that for a long time now has been laying plans for rebellion. I know of it only through friends. I don't take part in making its plans, I don't even know with any certainty how strong it is. But it exists. Seeing a power struggle in the Palace, such a group might try to act."

Now at last I knew what Desac came to talk about, and why I was always sent away when he met with the Waylord. That sent a rush of anger through me. Why hadn't I been allowed to listen to talk of rebellion, of rising against the Alds, fighting them, driving them out? Did Desac think I'd be afraid? Or go blabbing about it like a child? Did he think, because I had sheep hair, that I'd betray my people?

Gry wanted to know more about this group, but the Waylord was unable or unwilling to say much about it. Orrec was silent, brooding, till he asked at last, "How many Alds are here in Ansul—in the city? A thousand, two thousand?"

"Over two thousand," the Waylord said.

"They're greatly outnumbered."

"But armed and disciplined," Gry said.

"Trained soldiers," Orrec said. "It gives them an edge . . . But still. All these years—"

I burst out, "We fought! We fought them in every street, we held out for a year—till they sent an army twice as large—and then they killed and killed—Ista told me that in the days after the city fell, the canals were so choked with the dead that the water couldn't run—"

"Memer, I know your people were overrun and overmatched," Orrec said. "I didn't mean to question their courage."

"But we're not warriors," said the Waylord.

"Adira and Marra!" I protested.

His gaze rested on me a moment. "I didn't say we couldn't have heroes," he said. "But for centuries we settled our affairs by talking, arguing, bargaining, voting. Our quarrels were fought with words not swords. We were out of the habit of brutality . . . And the Ald armies seemed endless. How much more would they destroy? We lost heart. We have been a crippled people."

He held up his broken hands. His face was strange, wry; his eyes looked very dark.

"As you say, Orrec, they have the edge," he said. "Having one king, one god, one belief, they can act single-mindedly. They're strong. Yet the single can be divided. Our strength embraces multitude. This is our sacred earth. We live here with its gods and spirits, among them, they among us.

We endure with them. We've been hurt, weakened, enslaved. But only if they destroy our knowledge are we destroyed."

♦

TWO DAYS AFTER THAT, when we went to the Council Square again, I found out why Gry had given me that glance when she said, "We can do some listening." She wanted Mem the apprentice groom to talk to the Ald stableboys and cadet soldiers who hung around to hear Orrec recite. "Keep an ear out," she said. "Ask about the new Gand in Medron. About the Night Mouth. You were talking for a long time with one of those boys the other day."

"The pimply one," I said.

"He took a shine to you."

"He wanted to know if I'd sell him my sister for sex," I said.

Gry whistled, a soft little down-note, *tiu*.

"Endure," she said softly.

The Waylord had used that word. I took it as my guide word, my orders. I would obey. I would endure.

This time, when the Gand came out of the great tent to hear Orrec, Iddor and the priests didn't follow him. Partway through the recitation a noise began inside the tent, a lot of loud chanting and drum banging—evidently the priests performing a ceremony. Some of the courtiers around the Gand looked disturbed, others shrugged and whispered. Ioratth sat imperturbable. Orrec finished the stanza and fell silent.

The Gand gestured to him to go on.

"I would not show disrespect to those who worship," Orrec said.

"It is not worship," Ioratth said. "It is disrespect. Proceed, if you will, Maker."

Orrec bowed and went on with the piece, another Ald hero tale. When it was done, Ioratth had him brought a glass of water and began to talk with him, several of the courtiers joining in. And I, obeying my orders, slipped back towards the group of boys and men in the shade of the stable wall.

Simme was there. He came right over to me. He was bigger than I was, a tall, strong boy. There were fair, fuzzy hairs among the pimples around his mouth—the Alds are hairier than my people, and many have beards. Yet

when I saw the way he greeted me, almost cringing, hoping that I liked him, I thought: he's a little boy.

All I knew was my city and my house and books, while he had travelled with an army and was a soldier in training, but I knew that I knew more than he did, and was tougher. He knew it, too.

It made it hard to hate him. There's some virtue in hating people who are stronger than you, but to hate somebody weaker is contemptible and uncomfortable.

He didn't know what to talk about, and at first I thought we wouldn't be able to talk at all, but then I thought to ask him something I really wanted to know. "Where did you hear what you were talking about the other day," I said, "all that stuff about temples and prostitutes?"

"Some of the men," he said. "They said you heathens had these temples, where they had these orgies with these priestesses of this goddess, this demoness, that made men, you know, have sex with the priestesses. The demoness possessed them. And they'd have sex with any man. Anybody who came along. All night."

He'd brightened up considerably at the thought.

"We don't have any priestesses," I said flatly. "Or priests. We do our own worship."

"Well, maybe it was just women who went to this temple, and the demoness made them have sex with anybody. All night."

"How could people get inside a temple?"

In Ansul, the word "temple" usually means a little shrine on the street or in front of a building or at a crossways—altars, places to worship at. Many of them are just god-niches like the ones inside houses. You touch the sill of the temple to say the blessing, or lay a flower as an offering. Many street temples were wonderful little buildings of marble, two or three feet high, carved and decorated, with gilt roofs. The Alds had knocked those all down. Some temples were hung up in trees, and the Alds left them, thinking they were birdhouses. In fact if a bird nested in a temple it was a joyful thing, a blessing, and a lot of the old tree temples had swallows and sparrows and thrushes in them year after year. The best luck of all was an owl. The owl is the bird of the Deaf One.

I knew that to the Alds a temple meant a full-sized building. I didn't care.

My question did get his mind off the notion of all-night sex, anyway. He frowned and said, “What do you mean? Everybody goes into temples.”

“What for?”

“To pray!”

“What do you mean, ‘pray’?”

“Worship Atth!” Simme said, staring.

“How do you worship Atth?”

“You go to the ceremony?” he said, in a questioning tone, incredulous that I didn’t know what he was talking about. “And the priests sing and drum and dance, and they speak the words of Atth? You know! You’re down on your hands and knees? And you knock your head on the ground four times and say the words after the priests.”

“What for?”

“Well, if you want something, you pray to Atth, you knock your head on the ground and pray for it.”

“Pray *for* it? How do you pray *for* something?”

He was beginning to look at me as if I was feeble-minded.

I returned the look. “You don’t make sense,” I said. I was in fact rather curious to understand his idea of praying, but I didn’t want him to start feeling superior to me. “You can’t *pray* for things.”

“Of course you can! You pray to Atth for life and health and, and, and everything else!”

I did understand him. Everybody cries out to Ennu when they’re frightened. Everybody prays to Luck for things they want; that’s why he’s called the Deaf One. But I said, contemptuously, “That’s begging, not praying. We pray for blessing, not for things.”

He was both shocked and stymied. He looked sullen. He said, “You can’t be blessed. You don’t believe in Atth.”

Now I was shocked. To say to someone that they couldn’t be blessed, that was horrible. Simme didn’t seem like a person who could even think such a cruel thing. I finally said, much more cautiously, “What do you mean, ‘believe in’?”

He stared at me. “Well, to believe in Atth is—is to believe Atth is god.”

“Of course he is. All the gods are god. Why shouldn’t Atth be?”

“What you call gods are demons.”

I thought about it for a while. “I don’t know if I believe there are demons, but I do know the gods. I don’t understand why you have to ‘believe’ in only one god and none of the others.”

“Because if you don’t believe in Atth you’re damned and when you die you’ll turn into a demon!”

“Who says so?”

“The priests!”

“And you believe *that*?”

“Yes! The priests know about stuff like that!” He was getting more and more unhappy, and spoke angrily.

“I don’t think they know much about Ansul,” I said, realising, a little late, that antagonising him was not the best way to get information out of him. “Maybe they know all about Asudar. But things are different here.”

“Because you’re heathens!”

“Right,” I said, nodding, agreeing. “We’re heathens. So we have a lot of gods. But we don’t have any demons. Or priests. Or temple prostitutes. Unless they’re about six inches high.”

He was silent, scowling.

“I heard the army came looking for a specially bad place here,” I said after a while, trying to speak in a more friendly way and feeling both devious and exposed. “Some sort of hole in the ground where all the demons are supposed to come from.”

“I guess so.”

“What for?”

“I don’t know,” he said. He looked very glum, screwing up his pale eyes and frowning.

We were sitting on the pavement in the shade of the wall. I began scratching criss-cross patterns in the dust on the paving stone.

“Somebody said your king in Medron died,” I said, as easily as I could. I used our old word, king, not their word, gand.

He merely nodded. Our discussion had discouraged him. After a long time he said, “Mekke said maybe the new High Gand would order the army back home to Asudar. I guess you’d like that.” He glanced at me sullenly.

I shrugged. “Would you?”

He shrugged.

I wanted to make him go on talking, but didn't know how.

"That's fit-fat," he said.

Now I looked at him as if he was crazy, till I saw he was looking down at the pattern I'd made on the dusty stone. He reached over and drew a horizontal line in one square of the criss-cross.

"We call it fool's game," I said, and drew a vertical line in another square. We played to a draw, as you always do in fool's game unless you really are a fool. Then he showed me a game called finding the ambush, where you each have a hidden criss-cross with a square marked off—the ambush—and you guess in turn where the other person's ambush is, and the one who finds the other's ambush first is the winner. Simme won two out of three, which cheered him up and made him talkative.

"I hope the army gets moved back to Asudar," he said. "I want to get married. I can't get married here."

"Gand Ioratth did," I said, and then was afraid I'd gone too far, but Simme just grinned and made a lewd chuckling noise.

" 'Queen' Tirio?" he said. "Mekke says she was one of those temple prostitutes, to start with, and she put a spell on the Gand."

I'd had enough of him and his temple prostitutes. "There were never any temples," I said. "We had festivals. All over the city. Processions and dances. But you Alds stopped them. You killed anybody who danced. You were so afraid of your stupid demons." I got up, rubbed out the criss-cross with my foot, and stalked off to the stable.

Once I got to the stables I didn't know what to do. I was ashamed of myself. I had not endured. I had run away. I looked in at Branty, who acknowledged me with a half nicker. He was lipping up a little treat of oats delicately, making them last. The old hostler was perched up on a sawhorse nearby, watching him with what looked to me like adoration. He nodded to me. Branty went on twiddling his oats. I leaned up against a post and folded my arms and hoped I looked aloof and unapproachable.

And here came Simme across the stableyard, slouching and cringing and grinning like a dog that's been yelled at.

"Hey, Mem," he said, as if we'd parted days ago instead of two minutes ago.

I nodded at him.

He looked at me the way the old hostler looked at Branty.

“My father’s horse is over there,” he said. “Come see her. She’s from the royal stables in Medron.”

I let him lead me across the yard to the facing stalls to show me a fine, nervous, bright-eyed sorrel mare with a light mane, like the horse that had run at me in the market. Maybe it was that horse. She eyed me sideways over the door of the stall and shook her head.

“She’s named Victory,” Simme said, trying to pat the mare on the neck; she tossed her head and moved back in the stall. When he tried again, she turned at him, showing her long yellow teeth. Simme drew his hand back quickly. “She’s a real warhorse,” he said.

I gazed at the horse as if judging it from a deep knowledge and experience of horses, nodded again rather patronisingly, and sauntered back across the yard. To my relief, Chy and Shetar were just looking in the gateway. Several horses, seeing or smelling the lion, neighed and kicked in their stalls. I hurried over to Chy, while behind me Simme called, “See you tomorrow, Mem?”

On our way back to Galvamand I told them of my efforts to cross-examine Simme, which I thought completely foolish and fruitless; but they, and later the Waylord, listened intently. They remarked on Simme’s apparent lack of knowledge or interest when I spoke indirectly of the Night Mouth, and on his saying he had heard that the new Gand of Gands might recall the army to Asudar.

“Did he say anything about Iddor?” Gry asked.

“I didn’t know how to ask.”

“Is he a bright fellow?” the Waylord asked.

I said, “No. He’s stupid.” But I was ashamed, saying it. Even if it was true.

The day had been very warm, and the evening was mild. Instead of sitting in the gallery after dinner, we went out to the small outer courtyard that opens from it. It is sheltered by the house walls on two sides and marked off on the other two by slender columned arcades. The hill to the east rises immediately behind the house, and the scent of flowering shrubs was in the air. We sat looking north to the open evening sky faintly tinged with green.

“The house is built into the hillside, isn’t it?” Orrec said, looking up at the north windows of the Master’s room, above this court, and the walls

behind walls and roofs behind roofs of the ancient building.

"Yes," the Waylord said, and I don't know what was in his tone, but the hairs on my neck stirred.

He went on after a little while, "Ansul is the oldest city of the Western Shore, and this is the oldest house in Ansul."

"Is it true that the Aritans came from the desert a thousand years ago, and found all these lands we know empty of humankind?"

"Longer than a thousand years, and from farther than the desert," the Waylord said. "From the Sunrise, they said. They were people of a great empire far in the east. They sent explorers into the desert that bordered their lands to the west, and at last a group found a way across the desert—hundreds of miles wide, they say—to the green valleys of the Western Shore. Taramon led that group. Others followed. The books are very old, fragmentary, hard to understand. Many of them are lost, now. But it seemed they said that the people who came here were driven out of the Sunrise lands." He said a line of verse in Aritan, and then in our tongue: " 'The riverless waste that guards the exile's spring . . .' We are the children of those exiles."

"And no one has ever come from the east since then?"

"Nor gone back to the east."

"Except the Alds," said Gry.

"They went back into the desert, yes, or stayed there, but only the western border of it, where there are springs and rivers. East of Asudar, they say, for a thousand miles the sun is the Gand of Gands and the sand is his people."

"We live on the far edge of a world we know nothing of," Orrec said, gazing at the pale, deep sky.

"Some scholars think Taramon and the others were driven out because they were sorcerers, people who had uncanny powers. They think gifts such as you in the Uplands have were common among the people who came from the Sunrise, but have died out among us over the centuries."

"What do you think?" Gry asked.

"We have no such gifts as those here now," the Waylord said rather carefully. "But the earliest records of Ansul tell of people coming to be healed by women of the House of Actamo, who could restore sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf."

“Like the Cordemants!” Orrec said to Gry, and Gry said, “Backwards—as I thought!” They were about to explain this to us, when Desac came suddenly from the door of the gallery out into the court where we sat.

Like all the Waylord’s regular visitors, he let himself into and through the old part of the house, which was never locked. Ista sometimes fretted about the risk, but the Waylord said, “There are no locks on the doors of Galvamand,” and that was that. So Desac appeared now, startling Shetar. The halflion stood up with her head down and her ears flattened in a nasty, snaky way, and glared at him. He stopped short in the doorway.

Gry hissed a reproof at Shetar, who grunted and sat down, still glaring.

“Welcome, my friend, come sit with us,” the Waylord said, while I hurried to find a chair. Desac meanwhile took my chair next to the Waylord. That was like him. He did not have bad or coarse manners, but people who did not interest him did not exist for him. To him I was a furniture bringer, about as important as the furniture. He was single-minded, like the Alds. Perhaps soldiers have to be single-minded.

By the time I’d found a manageable chair and brought it out, he had been introduced to Orrec and Gry, and the Waylord must have told them that this was the leader of the resistance, or Desac had told them so himself, for that’s what they were talking about. I sat down to listen.

Desac took notice of me then. Furniture should not have ears. He looked from me to the Waylord with the plain intent of having me sent away as usual.

“Memer knows a soldier’s son, who told her that some of the Alds talk of the army being recalled to Asudar,” the Waylord said to Desac. “And the boy called Tirio Actamo Queen Tirio, as a common joke. Have you heard that title?”

“No,” Desac said stiffly. He shot another glance at me. He looked a little like Shetar glaring with her ears flat (though she by now had decided to ignore him, and was industriously washing a hind paw). “What we say here must go no farther than this courtyard,” he announced.

“Of course,” said the Waylord. He spoke kindly and easily as ever, but the effect was rather like Gry’s hiss at the lion. Desac looked away from me, cleared his throat, rubbed his chin, and spoke to Orrec.

“Blessed Ennu sent you here, Orrec Caspro,” he said, “or the Deaf One called you to us, in the very hour of our need.”

“Need for me?” said Orrec.

“Who can better call the people to arms than a great maker?”

Orrec’s face went still and his bearing stiff. After a moment of silence he said, “I’ll do what’s in my power to do. But I’m a foreigner.”

“Against the invader we are all one people.”

“I’ve been more at the Palace than in the marketplace. At the Gand’s beck and call. Why should your people trust me?”

“They do trust you. They speak of your coming as a sign, a portent that the great days of Ansul are about to return.”

“I’m not a portent, I’m a poet,” Orrec said. His face was hard as rock now. “A city rising against tyranny will find its own speakers.”

“You’ll speak for us when we call you,” Desac said, with equal certainty. “We’ve sung your poem ‘Liberty’ for ten years now here in Ansul, in hiding, behind doors. How did that song get here, who brought it? From voice to voice, from soul to soul, from land to land. When we sing it aloud at last, in the face of the enemy, do you think you’ll be silent?”

Orrec said nothing.

“I’m a soldier,” Desac said, “I know what makes people fight to win. I know what a voice like yours can do. And I know that’s why you came here when you did.”

“I came because the Gand asked me to come.”

“He asked you because the gods of Ansul moved his mind. Because our hour is coming. The balance changes!”

“My friend,” said the Waylord, “the balance may be changing, but are the scales in your hands?”

Desac held out his empty hands with a dry smile.

“There’s no sign of unrest among the Ald soldiers which we might take advantage of,” the Waylord said. “We’re not certain if there’s any change yet in Ald policy. And we don’t know what’s going on between Ioratth and Iddor.”

“Ah, but that we do know,” Desac said. “Ioratth intends to send Iddor back to Medron with a retinue of priests and soldiers. Seemingly to seek guidance from the new Gand Acray, actually to get Iddor and his priests out of Ansul. Tirio Actamo’s servant Ialba passed that word this morning to the slaves we’re in touch with at the Palace. Shes been a faithful informer.”

“Then you intend to wait till Iddor is gone before you move?”

“Why wait? Why let the rat escape the trap?”

“You plan to attack? The barracks?”

“An attack is planned. Not where or when they might expect it.”

“I know you have some arms, but have you the men?”

“Arms we have, and men enough. The people will join with us. We are twenty to one, Sulter! All these years of tyranny, enslavement, insult, defilement, the rage of all these years will burst out like fire in straw, everywhere in the city. All we need is to see how many we are, how few they are! All we need is a voice, a voice to summon us!”

His passion shook me, and I could see it had shaken Orrec, at whom he was looking now. An uprising, a revolt—to turn on those arrogant men in blue cloaks, drag them off their horses, use them as they had used us, cow them as they had cowed us, drive them out, out, out of our city, out of our lives— Oh! I had wanted that so long! I would follow Desac. I saw him truly now: a leader, a warrior. I would follow him as the people followed the heroes of old, through fire and water, through death.

But Orrec sat there with his face set, silent.

And Gry, watchful as her lion, silent.

In that tense silence the Waylord said, “Desac: if I ask concerning this—if I am answered—would you hear the answer?” He said the word *ask* with a strange emphasis.

Desac looked at him, at first evidently not understanding, then with a frown. He began a question, but the Waylord’s expression checked him. Desac’s hard, sad, weathered face changed slowly, becoming open, uncertain. “Yes,” he said, hesitant, then again more strongly, “Yes!”

“Then I will,” the Waylord said.

“Tonight?”

“The time is so near?”

“Yes.”

“Very well.”

“I’ll come tomorrow morning,” Desac said, standing up, alive with energy. “Sulter, my friend, I thank you from my heart. We will see—you will see—your spirits will speak for us.” He turned to Orrec— “And your voice will call us, you’ll be with us, I know. And we’ll meet here again, free men, in a free city! The blessing of Lero and all the gods of Ansul on

you all, and on the souls and shadows of Galvamand who hear us now!" He strode out, soldierly, exultant.

Orrec, Gry, and I looked at one another. Something important had been said, some promise had been made, which we three did not understand. The Waylord sat not looking at anyone, his face somber. Finally he glanced around at us. His gaze rested on me.

"Before there was a city here," he said, "before there was a house built here, the oracle was here." Then he spoke in Aritan: " 'They came here across the deserts, the weary people, the exiles. They came over the hills above the Western Sea and saw white Sul across the water. In the hillside was a cave, and from the cave ran a spring. On the darkness of the air in the cave they saw words written: *Here stay*. So they drank the water of that spring, and built their city there.' "

Chapter 9

WE PARTED for the night soon after that, and the Waylord said to me, "Come to the room, Memer."

So a little later I went back through the house and drew the letters in the air and entered the hidden room that goes back under the hill in darkness.

He came in some while later. I had lighted the oil lamp on the reading table. He set down the small lantern he carried but did not blow it out. He saw I had Orrec's book open on the table, and smiled a little.

"You like his poetry?"

"Above any other. Above Denios!"

He smiled again more broadly, teasingly. "Ah, they're all very well, these moderns, but none of them is a match for Regali."

Regali lived a thousand years ago, here in Ansul, writing in Aritan; the language is difficult and the poetry is difficult and I had not got very far with Regali, though I knew how well the Waylord loved her.

"In time," he said, seeing my expression. "In time . . . Now, I have a good deal to tell and to ask, my Memer. Let me talk to you a while." We sat at the table facing each other in the soft sphere of light the lamp made. Around it the high, long room darkened away; here and there shone the glimmer of a gold-stamped word on the spine of a book, and the books themselves were a silent gathering, a dark multiplicity.

He had said my name with such tenderness that it almost frightened me. But his face was grim as it was when he was in pain. When he spoke, it was with difficulty. He said, "I have not done well by you, Memer."

I began to protest, wanting to say he had given me all the treasures of my life—love, loyalty, learning—but he stopped me, gently, though still with that grim look. "You were my comfort," he said, "my dear comfort. And I looked only for comfort. I let hope go. I did not pay my debt to those who gave me life. I taught you to read, but I never let you know that

there was more to read than tales and poetry . . . Here. I gave you what was easy to give. I told myself, She's only a child, why should I burden her . . ."

I was aware of the darkness of the room behind my back; I felt it as a presence.

He went on, doggedly. "We were talking of gifts that run in the blood, in a lineage, like Gry's family, the Barres, who can speak with animals, or the Actamos, who could heal. We Galvas, whose ancestors inhabit this house as souls and shadows, we have—not a gift, maybe, but a responsibility. A bond. We are the people who live in this place. *Here stay*. We stay here. Here, this house. This room. We guard what is here. We open the door and close it. And we read the words of the oracle."

As he said the word, I knew he was going to say it. It was the word he had to say and I had to hear.

But my heart went cold and heavy in me.

"In my cowardice," he said, "I told myself it was unnecessary to speak of it to you. The time of oracles was past. It was an old story that was no longer true . . . Truth can go out of stories, you know. What was true becomes meaningless, even a lie, because the truth has gone into another story. The water of the spring rises in another place. The Fountain of the Oracle has been dry for two hundred years . . . But the spring that fed it still runs. Here. Within."

He sat facing me and that end of the room where it stretches into shadow, becoming darker and lower; he was no longer looking at me, but into that darkness. When he was silent I listened for the faint voice of the running water.

"I saw my duty and clung to it: to keep and guard what little was left—the books here, the books people brought me to preserve, the last of our treasure, the last of the glory of Ansul. And when you came here, into this room, that day, and we spoke of letters, of reading—you remember?"

"I remember," I said, and the memory warmed me a little. I looked at the shelves of books I had read and knew and loved, my friends.

"I told myself you were born to do the same, to take my place, to keep the one lamp burning. And I clung to that comfort, denying that I had any other duty to carry out, anything else to teach you.

“When your body is broken the way mine was, the mind too becomes misshapen, weak—” He held out his hands. “I can’t trust myself. I am too full of fear. But I should have trusted you.”

I wanted to say, to plead with him, “No, don’t, you can’t trust me, I’m weak, I’m afraid too!” but the words wouldn’t come out.

He had spoken harshly. After a while he went on, and the tenderness was back in his voice. “So,” he said, “a little more history. All the history you’ve patiently learned, you so young—all this weight of years on you, obligations undertaken by people dead for centuries! You’ve borne it all, you’ll bear this too.

“Your house is the House of the Oracle, and we are the readers of the oracle. It is here, in this room. You learned to write the words that let you enter, before you knew what writing was. And so you’ll know how to read the words that are written.

“The first were those I spoke just now: *Here stay*.

“In the early times, all the people of the Four Houses could read the oracle. That was their power, their sacredness. As the exiles of Aritan settled the coast and began to make towns elsewhere, still they came back to Ansul, to the Oracle House. They’d bring their questions: Is it right to do this? If we do that, what will happen? They’d come to the fountain and drink of it, and ask the blessing, and ask their question there. Then the readers of the oracle would go into the house, into the cave, into the dark. And if the question was accepted, they would read the answer written on the air.

“Sometimes, also, when they went into the darkness they would see words shining, though no question had been asked.

“All these words of the oracle were written down. The books they were written in were called the Galvan Books. Over the years the Galvas, who built their house at the oracle cave, became the sole keepers of the books, interpreters of the words, the voice of the oracle—the Readers.

“That led to jealousy and rivalry, in the end. It might have been better if we’d shared our power. But I think we weren’t able to. The gift gives itself.

“The Galvan Books themselves weren’t only records of the oracles. Sometimes the writing in them altered though no hand had touched it, or a Reader would open a book and find in it words no one had written there.

More and more often the oracle spoke on the pages of the books, not on the darkness of the cave.

“But often the words themselves were dark. Interpretation was needed. And there were the answers to questions that had not been asked . . . So the great Reader Dano Galva said, ‘We do not seek true answers. The strayed sheep we seek is the true question. The answer follows it as the tail follows the sheep.’ ”

He had been watching his thoughts in the air behind me; now he looked back at me, and was silent.

“Have you—have you read the oracle?” I asked at last. I felt as if I hadn’t spoken for a month; my throat was dry and my voice thready.

He answered slowly. “I began to read the Galvan Books when I was twenty, with my mother as my guide. The most ancient of them first. The words in those are fixed, they no longer change. But the oldest are the most obscure, because they didn’t write the question with the answer, and so you have to guess the sheep from the tail . . . Then there are many books from later centuries, both questions and answers. Often both are obscure, but they repay study. And then, after they moved the library out of Galvamand, there were fewer questions. And the answers may change, or vanish, or appear with no question asked. Those are the books you cannot read twice, any more than you could drink the same water twice from the Oracle Spring.”

“Have you asked it a question?”

“Once.” He gave a brief laugh and rubbed his upper lip with the knuckles of his left hand. “I thought it was a good question, direct and plain, such as the oracle seems to respond to. It was when Ansul was first besieged. I asked: *Will the Alds take the city?* I got no answer. Or if I did, I was looking in the wrong book.”

“How did you— How do you ask?”

“You’ll see, Memer. I told Desac, tonight, I’d ask the oracle about the rebellion he plans. He knows of it only as an old story, but he knows that if it spoke it might help his cause.”

He studied me a moment. “I want you with me. Can you do that? Is it too soon?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

I was stiff with fear, cold, mindless fear. The hair on my neck and arms had been standing up ever since he began to speak of the books, the oracle books. I didn't want to see them. I didn't want to go where they were. I knew where they were, which books they were. At the thought of touching them my breath stuck in my throat. I almost said, "No, I can't." But the words stuck too.

What I finally said took me by surprise. I said, "*Are* there demons?"

When he did not answer, I went on, the words bursting out of me hoarse and unclear, "You say I'm a Galva, but I'm not—not only—I'm both—neither. How can I inherit this? I never even knew about it. How can I do something like this? How can I take this power, when I'm afraid—afraid of demons—the Alds' demons—because I'm an Ald too!"

He made a little sound to halt me and soothe me. I fell silent.

He asked, "Who are your gods, Memer?"

He asked it the way he might ask me, when he was teaching me, "What does Eront say in his *History* of the lands beyond the Trond?" And I gathered my mind together and answered him as I would answer then, trying to say truly what I knew.

"My gods are Lero. Ennu who makes the way easy. Deori who dreams the world. The One Who Looks Both Ways. The keepers of the hearthfire and the guardians of the doorway. Iene the gardener. Luck, who cannot hear. Caran, Lord of the Springs and Waters. Sampa the Destroyer and Sampa the Shaper, who are one. Teru at the cradle, and Anada who dances on the grave. The gods of the forest and the hills. The Sea Horses. The soul of my mother Decalo, and your mother Eleyo, and the souls and shadows of all who lived in this house, the former dwellers, the forerunners, who give us our dreams. The room-spirits, my room-spirit. The street-gods and the crossway-gods, the gods of the market and the council place, the gods of the city, and of stones, and the sea, and Sul."

Saying their names I knew they were not demons, that there were no demons in Ansul.

"May they bless me and be blessed," I whispered, and he whispered the words with me.

I stood up then and walked towards the doorway and back to the table, only because I had to move. The books, the books I knew, my dear companions, stood solid on the shelves. "What do we have to do?" I asked.

He stood up. He picked up the small lantern he had brought. “First the darkness,” he said. I followed him.

We went all the way down the long room, past the shelves where the books I feared were. The lantern gave small light, and I could not see them clearly. Beyond those last shelves the ceiling grew lower, and the light seemed less. I heard the sound of running water clearly now.

The floor had become uneven. Pavement gave way to dirt and rocks. His lame gait grew slower and more cautious.

I saw in the lantern’s flickering light a small stream of water that ran from the darkness and dropped down into a deep basin, vanishing underground. We passed the basin and followed beside the water, upstream, on a rocky path. Shadows dodged away from the lantern, quick, huge, and shapeless, running black across raw rock walls. We walked deep into a high tunnel, a long cave. The walls drew closer as we kept walking farther.

The light glittered in the water of a welling spring and trembled reflected on the rock roof above. The Waylord stopped. He raised the lantern, and shadows leapt wildly. He blew it out, and we stood in darkness.

“Bless us and be blessed, spirits of the sacred place,” his voice said, low and steady. “We are Sulter Galva of your people and Memer Galva of your people. We come in trust, honoring the sacred, following truth as we are shown it. We come in ignorance, honoring knowledge, asking to know. We come into darkness for light and into silence for words and into fear for blessing. Spirits of this place who made my people welcome, I ask an answer to my question. Will a rebellion, now, against the Alds who hold our city, fail or prevail?”

His voice made no echo off the rock walls. Silence snuffed it out utterly. There was no sound but the trickle of the spring, and my breathing, and his. It was absolutely dark. My eyes fooled me again and again, making faint lights flash, and colors blur and vanish in the black in front of me, that sometimes seemed to be right up against my eyes like a blindfold, and then deep and far as a starless sky, so that I feared to fall as if standing on a cliff’s edge. Once I thought I saw a glimmer taking form, the shape of a letter, but it went out suddenly, utterly, as a spark goes out. We stood a long time, long enough that I began to feel the rock pressing through my

thin shoe soles and the ache in my back from not moving. I was dizzy because there was nothing in the world, no thing at all, only blackness and the sound of water and the pressure of the rock under my feet. No air moved. It was cold. It was still.

I felt warmth, his warmth, a light touch on my arm. We murmured the blessing and turned round. Turning, I became dizzier, disoriented. I didn't know which way I was facing in this utter dark—had I turned halfway or clear round? I reached out and found him there, the warmth, the touch of the cloth of his sleeve; I took hold of it and followed him. I wondered why he did not light the lantern, but dared not speak. It seemed a long way we went, far longer than the way in. I thought we were going the wrong way, deeper and deeper into the dark. I wouldn't believe it when I first began to see a change, a dimness growing out of darkness ahead of us, not visibility yet but the promise of it. I let go his arm then. But he, lame, took my arm, and held it till we could see our way.

When we were in the room again the space around us was airy and welcoming, and everything was distinct, full of a warm light, even down here at the cave end, the shadow end.

He looked at me searchingly. Then he turned and went to the shelves that had been built where the rock of the cave mouth gave place to plastered wall. Through the plaster here and there a rough cornice of rock stuck out. The shelves were set into the wall, not built out from it. On them were books, some small, some large and coarsely bound, some standing, others lying, maybe fifty or so in all. Some shelves were empty or held only a volume or two. The Waylord looked at the shelves as one does when seeking a book but not certain which or where it is, scanning. He looked again at me.

I looked at once for the white book, the book that had bled. I saw it instantly.

He saw where I was looking. He saw that I could not take my eyes from it. He went forward and took the white book from the shelf.

I stepped back when he did so, I couldn't help it. I said, "Is it bleeding?"

He looked at me, and at the book; he let it fall open gently in his hands.

"No," he said. He held it out to me.

I took another step back from it.

"Can you read it, Memer?"

He turned it and held it out to me again, open. I saw the small, square, white pages. The right-hand page was blank. On the left-hand page there were a few words written small.

I took a hard step forward, and a second step, my hands clenched. I read the words aloud: *Broken mend broken*.

The sound of my voice was terrible to me, it was not my voice at all but a deep, hollow, echoing sound swelling out all round my head. I cried out, "Put it back, put it away!" and turned and tried to walk back towards the lamp that shone in a sphere of gold far off at the other end of the room, but it was like walking in a dream, I could move my legs only slowly, heavily. He came and took my arm, and together we made our way back. It grew easier for me as we went. We reached the reading table. That was like coming home, coming into firelight out of the night, a haven.

I sat down in the chair with a great, shuddering sigh. He stood a little while stroking my shoulders gently, then went round the table and sat down facing me, as we had been before.

My teeth chattered. I wasn't cold any longer, but my teeth chattered. It was a while before I could make my mouth obey me at all.

"Was that the answer?"

"I don't know," he murmured.

"Was it—was it the oracle?"

"Yes."

I took a while longer to bite my lips, which felt stiff as cardboard, and tried to make my breath come evenly.

"Had you read in that book before?" I asked him.

He shook his head.

"I saw no words," he said.

"You didn't see—on the page—?" I gestured, to show that the words had been on the left-hand page, and I saw my fingers begin to write the letters on the air. I made them stop.

He shook his head.

That made it even worse.

"Was—what I said, was it the answer to the question you asked?"

"I don't know," he said.

"Why didn't it answer *you*?"

He said nothing for quite a while. At last he said, “Memer, if you had asked the question, what would it have been?”

“*How can we be free of the Alds?*” I said at once, and saying it I felt that again I was speaking with another voice, a loud deep voice not mine. I closed my mouth, I snapped my teeth shut on the thing that spoke through me, used me.

And yet that was the question I would have asked.

“The true question,” he said, with a half smile.

“The book bled,” I said. I was determined now to speak for myself, not to be spoken through—to say what I would say, to take control. “Years and years ago, when I was little. I went down to the shadow end. I told you that, I told you part of it. I told you I thought one of the books made a noise. But I didn’t tell you I saw that one. That white book. And I took it from the shelf, and there was blood on the pages. Wet blood. Not words, but blood. And I never went back. Not until tonight. I— If— If there are no demons, all right, there are no demons. But I am afraid of what is in that cave.”

“So am I,” he said.

♦

WE WERE BOTH TIRED, but there was no question of sleep yet. He relighted the small lantern, I put out the lamp, he drew the words on the air, and we went out of the room, through the corridors, back to the north courtyard where we had sat earlier that evening. A great ceiling of stars stood over it. I blew out the lantern. We sat there in starlight, silent for a long time.

I asked, “What will you tell Desac?”

“My question, and that I received no answer.”

“And—what the book said?”

“That is yours to tell him or not, as you choose.”

“I don’t know what it means. I don’t know what question it was answering. I don’t understand it. Does it make sense at all?”

I felt that I’d been tricked, that I’d been made use of without being told what for, as if I were a mere thing, a tool. I had been frightened. Now I was humiliated and angry.

“It makes the sense we can make of it,” he said.

“That’s like telling fortunes with sand.” There are women in Ansul who, for a few pennies, will take a handful of damp sea sand and drop it on a plate, and from the lumps and peaks and scatters of the sand they foretell good fortune and bad, journeys, money ventures, love affairs, and so on. “It means whatever you want it to mean.”

“Maybe,” he said. After a while he went on, “Dano Galva said that to read the oracle is to bring rational thought to an impenetrable mystery . . . There are answers in the old books that seemed senseless to those who heard them. *How should we defend ourselves from Sundraman?* they asked the oracle, when Sundraman first threatened to invade Ansul. The answer was, *To keep bees from apple blossoms*. The councillors were irate, saying the meaning was so plain it was foolish. They ordered an army to be raised to build a wall along the Ostis and defend it from Sundraman. The southerners crossed the river, knocked down the wall, defeated our army, marched here to Ansul City, killed those who resisted them, and declared all Ansul a protectorate of Sundraman. Ever since then they’ve been excellent neighbors, interfering with us very little, but greatly enriching us with trade. It was not a recommendation but a warning: To keep bees from apple blossoms is to have trees that bear no fruit. Ansul was the blossom and Sundraman the bee. That’s clear now. It was clear to the Reader, Dano Galva; as soon as she read it she said it meant we should offer no resistance to Sundraman. For that she was called a traitor. From that time on the Gelb and Cam and Actamo clans said the Council should not consult the oracle, and pressed for the university and the library to be moved from Galvamand.”

“Much good the oracle did the Reader and her house,” I said.

“ ‘The nail’s hit once, the hammer a thousand times.’ ”

I thought that over. “What if one doesn’t choose to be a tool?”

“You always have that choice.”

I sat and looked up at the great depths of stars. I thought that the stars were like all the souls who lived in former times in this city, this house, all the thousands of spirits, the forerunners, lives like distant flames, lights far and farther away in the great darkness of time. Lives past, lives to come. How could you tell one from the other?

I had wanted to ask why the oracle couldn’t speak plainly, why it couldn’t just say *Don’t resist*, or *Strike now*, instead of cryptic images and

obscure words. After looking at the stars, that seemed a foolish question. The oracle was not giving orders but just the opposite: inviting thought. Asking us to bring thought to mystery. The result might not be very satisfactory but it was probably the best we could do.

I gave an enormous yawn, and the Waylord laughed.

“Go to bed, child,” he said, and I did.

Making my way to my room through the dark halls and corridors I expected to lie awake, haunted by the strangeness of the cave and by the words I had read and the voice that had spoken through me saying them: *Broken mend broken*. I touched the god-niche by the door, fell into my bed, and slept like a stone.

Chapter 10

WHEN DESAC came the next day, I wasn't with the Waylord, I was helping Ista with the wash. She and Bomi and I had the boilers going soon after dawn, set up the cranked wringer, strung the wash lines, and by noon had filled the kitchen courtyard with clean sheets and table linens blinding white and snapping in the windy, hot sunlight.

In the afternoon, walking in the old park with Shetar, Gry told me what had occurred in the morning.

The Waylord had come to the Master's room to say that Desac wished to speak with Orrec. Orrec asked Gry to come with him. "I left Shetar behind," Gry said, "since she seems to dislike Desac." They went down to the gallery, and there Desac again tried to make Orrec promise to go out and speak to the people of the city, rousing them to drive out the Alds, when the moment came.

Desac was eloquent and urgent, and Orrec was distressed, divided in mind, feeling that this was not his battle, and yet that any battle for freedom must be his. If Ansul rose up against tyranny, how could he stand aside? But he was given no choice in time or place, and also no real knowledge of how this rebellion was to be made. Desac was clearly wise to say so little about it, since its success depended on its being a surprise; yet, as Orrec told her, he didn't like being used, he'd rather be included.

I asked what the Waylord had said, and Gry said, "Almost nothing. Last night, you know, when Sulter said he'd 'ask,' and Desac jumped at it?—Well, nothing at all was said about that. They'd said it before we came down, no doubt."

I hated not to be able to tell her anything about the oracle; I didn't want to keep anything from Gry. But I knew it was not mine to speak of, or not yet.

She went on. “I think Sulter is worried about numbers. More than two thousand Ald soldiers, he said. Most of them near the Palace and the barracks. At least a third armed and on duty, and the others close to their weapons. How can Desac move a large enough force against them without alerting the guards? Even at night? The night guards are mounted. Asudar horses are like dogs, you know, they’re trained to give a signal if they sense anything amiss. I hope that old soldier knows what he’s doing! Because I think he’s going to do it pretty soon.”

My mind moved swiftly, thinking of fighting in the streets. *How can we be free of the Alds?* With sword, knife, club, stone. With fist, with force, with our rage unleashed at last. We would break them, break their power, their heads, their backs, their bodies . . . *Broken mend broken*.

I was standing on a path among great bushes. The sun was hot on my head. My hands were dry, swollen, and sore from hot water and handling linens all the morning. Gry stood near me, watching me with alert concern. She said gently, “Memer? Where were you?”

I shook my head.

Shetar came bounding along the path to us. She halted, holding up her head with a proud and conscious air. She opened her fierce, fanged mouth, and a small blue butterfly came fluttering out and flew off, quite unconcerned.

We both laughed uncontrollably. The lion looked a little embarrassed or confused.

“She’s the girl that spoke blossoms and bells and butterflies!” said Gry. “You know about her—when Cumbelo was King?”

“And her sister spoke lice and lugworms and lumps of mud.”

“Oh, cat, cat,” Gry said, tugging at the fur behind Shetar’s ears till the lion rolled her head with pleasure, purring.

I could not put it all together. Fighting in the streets, darkness in the cave, terror, laughter, sunlight on my head, starlight in my eyes, a lion who said a butterfly.

“Oh, Gry, I wish I understood *something*,” I said. “How do you ever make sense out of what happens?”

“I don’t know, Memer. You keep trying, and sometimes it does.”

“Rational thought and impenetrable mystery,” I said.

“You’re as bad as Orrec,” she said. “Come on. Come home.”

That night Orrec and the Waylord talked about the Gand Ioratth, and I found I could listen without closing my mind. Maybe it was because I had seen the Gand twice now, and despite the hateful pomp, and the cringing slaves, and my knowledge that if the whim took him he could have us all buried alive, what I had seen was a man, not a demon. A hard, tough, wily old man who loved poetry with all his heart.

Orrec spoke almost to my thought: “This fear of demons, devilry—it’s unworthy of him. I wonder how much of all that he believes, in fact.”

“He may not fear demons much,” the Waylord said. “But so long as he can’t read, he’ll fear the written word.”

“If I could just take a book there and open it and read from it—the same words I speak without the book—!”

“Abomination.” The Waylord shook his head. “Sacrilege. He’d have no choice but to hand you over to the priests of Atth.”

“But if the Alds decide to stay here, to rule Ansul, to deal with its neighbors, with other lands and nations, they can’t go on abominating what trade is based on—records and contracts. And diplomacy—let alone history, poetry! Did you know that in the City States, ‘ald’ means idiot? ‘No use to talk to him, he’s an ald.’ Surely Ioratth has begun to see the disadvantage they’re at.”

“Let’s hope that he has. And that the new king in Medron sees it.”

But I began to be impatient with this talk. The Alds weren’t going to decide to stay here, rule us, deal with our neighbors. It wasn’t up to them. I found myself saying, “Does it matter?”

They all looked at me, and I said, “They can go be illiterate all they please in Asudar.”

“Yes,” the Waylord said, “if they’ll go.”

“We’ll drive them out.”

“Into the countryside?”

“Yes! Out of the city!”

“Are our farmers able to fight them? And if we chased them clear home to Asudar—won’t the High Gand see it as an insult and threat to his new power, and send more thousands of soldiers against us? He has an army. We do not.”

I didn’t know what to say.

The Waylord went on. “These are considerations which Desac dismisses. He may well be right to do so. ‘Forethought, bane of action.’ But do you see, Memer, now that things are changing among the Alds themselves, I have my first hope of regaining our liberty by persuading them that we’re more profitable to them as allies than as slaves. That would take time. It would end in a compromise not a victory. But if we seek victory now and fail, hope will be hard to find.”

I could say nothing. He was right, and Desac was right. The time to act was upon us, but how to act?

“I could speak for you to Ioratth better than I could speak for Desac to the crowd,” Orrec said. “Tell me, are there people in the city who would talk in these terms to Ioratth, if he agreed to some negotiation?”

“Yes, and outside the city, too. We’ve kept in touch over the years with all the towns of the Ansul Coast, scholars and merchants, people who were waylords and mayors and officers of the festivals and ceremonies. Boys run messages from town to town, wagoners carry them along with the cabbages. The soldiers seldom search for written messages, they’d rather have nothing to do with sacrilege and wizardry.”

“ ‘O Lord Destroyer, give me an ignorant enemy!’ ” Orrec quoted.

“In the city, some of the men I’ve talked about this with over the years are with Desac now. They seek any way to get the Ald yoke off our neck. They’re ready to fight. But they might be willing to talk. If the Alds will listen.”

ORREC WAS NOT SUMMONED to the Palace the next day. Late in the morning he went down to the Harbor Market, on foot, with Gry. He didn’t give any advance notice, no tent was set up, but as soon as he walked into the market square people recognised and followed him. They didn’t press very close to him, partly because of Shetar, but they made a moving circle round him, greeted him, called out his name, and shouted, “Recite, recite!” One man shouted, “Read!”

I didn’t walk with them. I was in boy’s clothes, as usual when I went in the streets, and didn’t want to be seen as Mem the groom with Gry, who wasn’t in disguise. I ran round to the raised marble pavement in front of

the Admirals' Tower and climbed up on the base of the horse statue there, from which I had a good view of the whole market. The statue is the work of Redam the sculptor, carved from one great block of stone; the horse stands foursquare, strong and heavy, his head raised and turned to the west, looking out to sea. The Alds had destroyed most statues in the city but left this one untouched, perhaps because it was a horse; certainly they didn't know that the sea gods, the Seunes, are imagined and worshipped in the form of horses. I touched the Seune's big stone left front hoof and murmured the blessing. The Seune returned the blessing to me in the form of shade. It was a hot day already, and going to get hotter.

Orrec took his position where the tent had been on the first day he spoke here, and the people crowded round him. The pedestal I was on soon filled up with boys and men, but I hung on to my place right between the horse's front legs, shoving back hard when people shoved me. Many of the stall keepers in the market tossed a cloth over their goods and joined the crowd to listen to the maker, or stood on a stool by their booth to see over the heads of the throng. I saw five or six blue cloaks in the crowd, and soon a troop of mounted Ald soldiers came down the Council Way to the corner of the square, but they stopped without trying to push into the crowd. There was a great hum of noise, talking and laughing and shouting, and it was a shock when all that human commotion ceased at once, dropped into utter silence, at the first note of Orrec's lyre.

He said a poem first, Tetemer's love poem "The Hills of Dom," an old favorite all up and down the Ansul Coast. When he had spoken it he sang the refrain with the lyre, and the people sang with him, smiling and swaying.

Then he said, "Ansul is a small land, but her songs are sung and her tales are told through all the Western Shore. I first learned them far to the north, in Bendraman. The makers of Ansul are famous from the farthest south to the River Trond. And there have been heroes here in peaceful Ansul and Manva, brave warriors, and the makers have told of them. Hear the tale of Adira and Marra on the Mountain Sul!"

A great, strange sound went up from the crowd, a kind of moaning roar both of joy and of grief. It was frightening. If Orrec was daunted, if the response he got was more than he'd expected, he didn't show it. He lifted his head proudly and sent his voice out strong and clear: "In the days of

the Old Lord of Sul, an army came from the land of Hish . . .” The crowd stood completely motionless. I was fighting tears the whole time. The story, the words, were so dear to me, and I had only known them in silence, in secret, in the hidden room, alone. Now I heard them spoken aloud among a great crowd of my people, in the heart of my city, under the open sky. Across the straits the mountain stood blue in the blue haze, its peak sharp white. I held on to the stone hoof of the Seune and fought my tears.

The tale ended, and in the silence one of the Ald horses gave a loud, ringing whinny, a regular warhorse cry. It broke the spell. The crowd laughed, moved, and began crying out, “Eho! Eho! Praise to the maker! Eho!” Some were shouting, “Praise to the heroes! Praise to Adira!” The mounted troop up at the east edge of the square shifted as if they were forming to ride into the crowd, but the people paid no attention and did not move away from them. Orrec stood quietly, his head bowed, for a long time. The tumult did not die away, and at last he spoke through it, not outshouting the crowd but as if speaking in an ordinary tone, though his voice carried amazingly: “Come on, sing with me.” He raised his lyre, and as they began to quieten, he sang out the first line of his song “Liberty”: “As in the dark of winter night . . .”

And we sang it with him, thousands of voices. Desac was right. The people of Ansul knew that song. Not from books, we had no more books. From the air—from voice to voice, from heart to heart, down through all the western lands.

When it was done and the moment of silence passed, the tumult rose again, cheers and calls for more, but also shouts as of anger, and somewhere in the crowd a deep-voiced man called out, “Lero! Lero! Lero!”—and other voices took it up as a chant, with a fast beat on a mounting tune. I had never heard it, but I knew it must be one of the old chants, the songs of festival, procession, worship, that had been sung in the streets when we were free to praise our gods. I saw the mounted troop pushing their way into the crowd, which caused enough commotion that the chant lost force and died away. I saw Orrec and Gry making their way down the steps to the east, not across the square but behind the Ald troop. The crowd was still resisting the horsemen, though slowly giving way to them—it’s very hard not to get out of the way of a horse coming straight at you, I can testify. I slid down from the pedestal and wriggled through the

crowd till I got onto Council Way, ran up it and cut across behind the Customs House, and met my friends on the way up West Street.

A mob of people were following them, but not closely, and most of them didn't come farther than the bridge over North Canal. The maker, the singer, is sacred, not to be intruded on. While I was still up on the pedestal I saw people touching the place where Orrec had stood on the pavement above the Admiralty steps, touching it for the blessing; and no one would walk across that spot for a while. In the same way, they followed him at a distance, calling out praise and jokes and singing his hymn to liberty. And again for a moment that chant rose up, "Lero! Lero! Lero!"

We said nothing as we climbed the hill to Galvamand. Orrec's brown face was almost grey with fatigue, and he walked blindly; Gry held his arm. He went straight to the Master's room. Gry said he would rest there a while. I began to see the cost of his gift.

EARLY IN THE EVENING I was down in the stable court playing with a new batch of kittens. Bomi's cats had been quite shy and retiring ever since Shetar appeared, but kittens have no fear. This lot was just old enough to be wildly funny, chasing one another over and through a woodpile, falling over their tails, stopping to stare with their little, round, intent eyes, and flying off again. Gudit had been exercising Star out on the horse path. He stood watching the kittens with a glum and disapproving air. One got into trouble, scrabbling straight up a post and then sticking there, crying, not knowing how to get back down; Gudit gently picked it off the post, like a burr, and gently put it back on the woodpile, saying, "Vermin."

We heard the clatter of hoofs, and a blue-cloaked officer rode in and halted his horse in the archway.

"Well?" said Gudit in a loud, belligerent tone, straightening up his hunched back as well as he could and glaring. Nobody rode into his stableyard uninvited.

"A message from the Palace of the Gand of Ansul to the maker Orrec Caspro," said the officer.

"Well?"

The officer looked curiously at the old man for a moment. “The Gand will have the maker attend him at the Palace late tomorrow afternoon,” he said, politely enough.

Gudit gave a brief nod and turned his back. I also looked away, picking up a kitten as an excuse. I knew that elegant sorrel mare.

“Hey, Mem,” somebody said. I froze. I turned around reluctantly, and there was Simme standing inside the stableyard. The officer was backing his mare out of the archway. He spoke to Simme as he turned the horse, and Simme saluted him.

“That’s my dad,” Simme said to me, with transparent pride. “I asked him if I could come along with him. I wanted to see where you live.” His smile was fading as I stared at him saying nothing. “It’s, it’s really big,” he said. “Bigger than the Palace. Maybe.” I said nothing. “It’s the biggest house I ever saw,” he said.

I nodded. I couldn’t help it.

“What’s that?”

He came closer and bent over to see the kitten, which was squirming in my hands and needling me fiercely.

“Kitten,” I said.

“Oh. Is it, is it from that lion?”

How could anybody be so stupid?

“No, just a house cat. Here!” I passed the kitten to him.

“Ow,” he said, and half dropped it. It scampered off with its tiny tail in the air.

“Claws,” he said, sucking his hand.

“Yes, it’s really dangerous,” I said.

He looked confused. He always looked confused. It was unseemly to take advantage of anybody so confused. But it was almost irresistible.

“Can I see the house?” he asked.

I stood up and dusted my hands. “No,” I said. “You can look at it from outside. But you can’t go in. You shouldn’t have come even this far. Strangers and foreigners stop in the forecourt until they’re invited farther. People with manners dismount in the street and touch the Sill Stone before they come into the forecourt.”

“Well, I didn’t know,” he said, backing away a little.

“I know you didn’t. You Alds don’t know anything about us. All you know is that we can’t come under your roof. You don’t even know that you can’t come under ours. You are ignorant.” I was trying to hold back the flood of shaking, triumphant rage that swelled in me.

“Well, look. I was hoping we could be friends,” Simme said. He said it in his hangdog way. But it took some courage to say it at all.

I walked towards the arch, and he came with me.

“How can we be friends? I’m a slave, remember?”

“No you aren’t. Slaves are . . . Slaves are eunuchs, you know, and women, and . . .” He ran out of definitions.

“Slaves are people who have to do what the master orders. If they don’t, they’re beaten or killed. You say you’re the masters of Ansul. That makes us slaves.”

“You don’t do anything I tell you to do,” he said. “You aren’t any kind of slave.”

He had a point there.

We had come out of the stableyard and were walking under the high north wall of the main house. It was built of massive squared stones for ten feet up from the ground; above that was a story of finer stonework with tall double-arched windows, and high above that carved cornices supported the deep eaves of the slate roof. He glanced up at it several times, quickly, askance, the way a horse eyes something that spooks him.

We came round into the forecourt, which goes the whole width of the house. It’s raised a step above the street and separated from it by a line of arcaded columns. The pavement is of polished stones, grey and black, fitted into a complex geometrical pattern, a maze. Ista told me how they used to dance the maze on the first day of the year, the spring equinox, in the old days, singing to Iene who blesses growing things. The pavement was dirty; dust and leaf litter had blown across it. It was a big job to sweep it. I tried sometimes, but I never could keep it clean. Simme started to walk across the maze.

“Get off that!” I said. He jumped, and followed me down the step between the columns into the street, staring with a startled, innocent look, almost like the kittens.

“Demons,” I said with a grin, a snarl, gesturing to the grey-and-black pattern of the stones. He didn’t even see it.

“What’s that?” he said. He was looking at the stump of the Oracle Fountain.

The fountain is to the right as you face the great doors. The basin is green serpentine—Lero’s stone—ten feet or so across. The water had sprung from a central jet; the bronze spout stuck up, now, out of a marble lump so broken and disfigured you could hardly see that it had once been shaped as an urn and carved with watercress leaves and lilies. Dust and dead leaves lay in the basin.

“A fountain full of demon water,” I said. “It ran dry centuries ago. But your soldiers smashed it all the same, to get the demons out.”

“You don’t have to talk about demons all the time,” he said sullenly.

“Oh but look,” I said, “see, around the base of the urn, those little carvings? Those are words. That’s writing. Writing’s black magic. Written words are all demons, aren’t they? You want to go nearer and read them? Want to see some demons close up?”

“Come on, Mem,” he said. “Lay off.” He glared at me, hurt and resentful. That was what I wanted, wasn’t it?

“All right,” I said after a while. “But look, Simme. There isn’t any way we can be friends. Not till you can read what the fountain says. Not till you can touch that stone and ask blessing on my house.”

He looked at the long, ivory-colored Sill Stone set into the center of the step, worn into a soft hollow by the hands that had touched it over all the centuries. I bent down now and touched it.

He said nothing. He turned at last and went away down Galva Street. I watched him go. There was no triumph in me. I felt defeated.

♦

ORREC CAME TO DINNER that evening, recovered and hungry. We talked first of his recitation, he and Gry and I telling the Waylord what he had said and how the crowd had responded to it.

Sosta had been down to the market to hear him and now was swoonier than ever, gazing at him across the table with her face gone all soft and loose, till he had to take pity on her. He tried to joke, but that didn’t work, so he tried to turn her mind from him to her real future, asking where she would live after she married. She managed to explain that her betrothed

had chosen to join our household and be a Galva. Orrec and Gry, who had a great interest in the ways people do things, asked all about our customs of marriage-bargain and chosen kinship. Mostly Sosta gazed, mute with adoration, and the Waylord answered; but when Ista sat down with us at table she had a chance to boast about her son-in-law to be, which she loved to do.

"It seems hard that he and Sosta can't see each other all this time before the wedding," Gry said. "Three months!"

"Betrothed couples used to be able to meet at any public occasion," the Waylord explained. "But now we have no dances or festivals. So the poor things have to catch glances in passing . . ."

Sosta blushed and smirked. Her betrothed strolled by regularly with his friends every evening, just when Ista and Sosta and Bomi happened to be sitting out in the side court facing Galva Street to take the air.

After dinner the rest of us went to the little north court. We found Desac already there waiting. He came forward and took Orrec's hands and called blessing on him. "I knew you'd speak for us!" he said. "The fuse is lit."

"Let's see what the Gand thinks of my performance," said Orrec. "I might get a critical commentary."

"Has he sent for you?" asked Desac. "Tomorrow? What time?"

"Late afternoon—is that right, Memer?"

I nodded.

"Will you go?" the Waylord asked.

"Of course," said Desac.

"I can scarcely refuse," Orrec said. "Though I could ask to postpone." He looked at the Waylord, alert to catch the meaning of his question.

"You must go," Desac said. "The timing is perfect." His tone was brusque and military.

I could see Orrec didn't like being told he must go. He kept his eyes on the Waylord.

"No profit in postponement, I suppose," the Waylord said. "But there may be some danger in going."

"Should I go alone?"

"Yes," Desac said.

"No," Gry said in a calm, flat voice.

Orrec looked at me. "Everybody gives orders except us, Memer."

“ ‘The gods love poets, for they obey the laws the gods obey,’ ” the Waylord said.

“Sulter, my friend, there’s danger in any undertaking,” Desac said with a kind of impatient compassion. “You’re walled up here, away from the life of the streets, the doings of the people. You live among shadows of ancient times and share their wisdom. But a time comes when wisdom is in action—when caution becomes destruction.”

“A time comes when the will to act defeats thought,” the Waylord said grimly.

“How long must I wait? There was no answer given!”

“Not to me.” The Waylord glanced very briefly at me.

Desac did not notice that. He was angry now. “Your oracle is not mine. I was not born here. Let books and children tell you what to do. I’ll use my head. If you distrust me as a foreigner you should have told me years ago. The people who are with me trust me. They know I never wanted anything but the freedom of Ansul and the restoration of the bond with Sundraman. Orrec Caspro knows that. He stands with me. I’ll go now. I’ll come back here to Galvamand when the city is free. Surely you’ll trust me then!”

He turned and strode out of the courtyard, not through the house but down the broken steps at the open north end. He turned the corner of the house and was gone. The Waylord stood silent, watching him.

After a long time Orrec asked, “Was I the fool who lit the fire?”

“No,” the Waylord said. “A spark from the flint, maybe. No blame in that.”

“If I go tomorrow I will go alone,” Orrec said, but the Waylord smiled a little and looked at Gry.

“You go, I go,” she said. “You know that.”

After a while Orrec said, “Yes, I do. But,” to the Waylord, “if I went too far today, the Gand may be forced to punish me, to show his power. Is that what you fear?”

The Waylord shook his head. “He’d have sent soldiers here. It’s Desac I fear. He will not wait for Lero.”

Lero is the ancient, sacred soul of the ground where our city stands. Lero is the moment of balance. Lero is a great round stone down in the Harbor Market, so poised that it might move at any time and yet has never moved.

The Waylord soon excused himself from us, saying he was tired. He gave me no sign to follow or come to him later. He went into the house, slow and lame, holding himself upright.

I woke again and again that night seeing the words in the book, *Broken mend broken*, hearing the voice say them, my mind going over them, over and over them, trying to make them into meaning.

Chapter 11

THE NEXT morning I did the house worship very early and then went down to both markets, not only to buy the food we needed but to see what was going on in the city. I thought everything would be changed, everybody would be ready for a great thing to happen, as I was. But nobody seemed ready for anything. Everything was just as always, people in the streets hurrying, not looking at one another, keeping out of trouble; Ald guards in blue cloaks swaggering at the corner of the marketplace; vendors in their stalls, children and old women bargaining and buying and creeping home on the byways. No tension, no excitement, nobody saying anything unusual. Only once I thought I heard somebody crossing the Customs Street bridge whistle a few notes of the tune of “Liberty.”

When Orrec and Chy set off for the Council House late in the afternoon they went on foot. They took Shetar, but not me. There was no reason to have a groom without a horse, and they were concerned that there might be danger. I was relieved. I didn’t want to face Simme, because every time I thought of him my heart sank with shame.

But as soon as they were gone I knew I couldn’t stay at home. I couldn’t bear to sit in the house waiting. I had to be closer to the Council Hill, where they were. I had to be near them.

I dressed in my women’s clothes, with my hair done up in a knot instead of worn long like a child or a man, so that I was Memer the girl instead of Mem the groom or Nobody the boy. I wanted to wear my own clothes because I needed to be myself. Perhaps I had to put myself into a little danger, to feel that I was with them.

I walked along Galva Street quickly, not looking up, as women always walked, till I came to Goldsmiths’ Bridge over the Central Canal. The gold of Ansul had mostly gone to enrich Asudar; many of the shops on the bridge had long been closed, but some still sold cheap trinkets and

worship-candles and such. I could go into one of the shops, out of the thoroughfare, and keep watch for my friends.

Even though nothing had been going on in the markets, and there was no sign of any agitation here at the bridge nearest the Council Hill, and the two Ald foot soldiers on guard duty were lounging on the bridge steps playing dice, I couldn't rid myself of the feeling that something was happening or about to happen—a sense that some great thing overhead was bending and bending, about to break.

I stood in the shadow of a shop doorway. I'd talked a little with the old man who kept the shop, telling him I was waiting to meet a friend; he nodded knowingly and disapprovingly, but let me stay. Now he dozed behind his counter with its trays of wooden beads, glass bangles, and incense sticks. Not many people went by outside. There was a little god-niche by the door frame and I touched the sill of it now and then, whispering the blessing.

As if in a dream I saw a lion pace by, lashing its tail.

I came out of the shop and fell into step with my friends, who looked only mildly surprised. "I like your hair that way," Gry said. She was dressed as Chy, but was no longer playing the role.

"Tell me what happened!"

"When we get home."

"No, please, now."

"All right," Orrec said. We were on the steps at the north end of the bridge. He turned aside at the bottom, where a railed marble pavement projects out over the canal; from it a narrow flight of stairs leads down to a pier for boats and fishermen. We descended those steps to the canal bank, right under the bridge, out of sight of the street. The first thing we did was go down and touch the water, with a word of blessing for Sundis, the river that makes our four canals. Then we all squatted there, watching the brownish-green, half-transparent water run. It seemed to carry urgency away with it. But pretty soon I said, "So?"

"Well," Gry said, "the Gand wanted to hear the story Orrec told in the market yesterday."

"Adira and Marra?"

They both nodded.

"Did he like it?"

“Yes,” Orrec said. “He said he didn’t know we had warriors like that. But he particularly liked the Old Lord of Sul. He said, ‘There is the courage of the sword and the courage of the word, and the courage of the word is rarer.’ You know, I wish I knew some way to bring him and Sulter Galva together. They’re men who would understand each other.”

That would have offended me a few days earlier. Now it seemed right.

“And nothing unusual happened? He didn’t ask you to sing ‘Liberty,’ did he?”

Orrec laughed. “No. He didn’t. But there was a little commotion.”

“The priests started a chanting worship in the tent again, just when Orrec started reciting,” Gry said. “Loud. Drums. Lots of cymbals. Ioratth went black as a thundercloud. He asked Orrec to stop, and sent an officer into the tent. And the head priest came right out, all in red with mirrors, very gorgeous he was, but grim as death. He stood there and said the holy worship of the Burning God was not to be interrupted by vile heathen impieties. Ioratth said the ceremony of sacrifice was to be at sunset. The priest said the ceremony had begun. Ioratth said it was two hours yet till sunset. The priest said the ceremony had begun and would continue. So Ioratth said, ‘An impious priest is a scorpion in the king’s slipper!’ And he sent for slaves and had a carpet set up on poles to make shade, by the arcade above the East Canal, and we all trooped over, and Orrec went on.”

“But Ioratth lost the round,” Orrec said. “The priests carried on with their sacrifice. Ioratth finally had to hurry over to the big tent so he wouldn’t miss the whole thing.”

“Priests are good at making people jump,” Gry said. “There’s a lot of priests in Bendraman. Bossing people about.”

“Well,” Orrec said, “they’re held in honor, and they perform important rites, so they get to meddling with morals and politics . . . Ioratth’s going to need support from his High Gand against this lot.”

“I think he sees you as support,” Gry said. “A way to begin making some kind of link with people here. I wonder if that’s why he sent for you.”

Orrec looked thoughtful, and sat thinking it over. A horse galloped by on the street high above us, with a loud, hard clackety-clackety of shod hoofs on stone. The sleek surface of the water ruffled and roiled out in the middle of the canal. The sea wind that had blown all day had died away,

and this was the first breath of the land wind of evening. Shetar, who had lain down on the dirt, sat up and made a low singsong snarling noise. The fur along her spine was raised a little, making her look fluffy.

The water rippled against the lowest marble step and the pilings of the pier. There was a smoky tint in the fading, red-gold light on the wooded hills above the city. Everything down here by the water was peaceful, and yet it was as if a breath were being held, as if everything held still, poised. The lion stood up, tense, listening.

Again a horse galloped past, up on the bridge above us—more than one horse, a racket of hoofs, and the sound of running feet on the bridge, and shouting, both up there and in the distance. We were all afoot now, staring up at the marble railing and the backs of the houses on the bridge. “What’s going on?” Orrec said.

I said aloud not knowing what I said, “It’s breaking, it’s breaking.”

The shouting and yelling were directly above us now; horses neighed; there was trampling of feet, more shouting, scuffling. Orrec started up the stairs and stopped, seeing people at the marble railings, a crowd of people, fighting or struggling, yelling orders, screaming in panic. He ducked as something came hurtling over the railing, a huge dark thing that crashed onto the mud by the staircase with a heavy sodden thud. Heads appeared at the top of the stairs, men peering down, gesturing, shouting.

Orrec had leapt down off the stairs. He said, “Under the bridge!” We all four ran to hide under the low last arch of the bridge where it joined the shore, where the men on the bridge could not see us.

I saw the thing that had fallen. It was not huge. It was only a man. It lay like a heap of dirty clothes near the foot of the steps. I could not see the head.

No one came down the steps. The racket up on the bridge died suddenly, completely, though somewhere in the distance, up towards the Council House, there was a great, dull noise. Gry went to the fallen man and knelt by him, glancing up once or twice at the railing above her, from which she might be seen. She came back soon. Her hands were dark with mud or blood. “His neck’s broken,” she said.

“Is he an Ald?” I whispered.

She shook her head.

Orrec said, “Stay here a while, or try to get back to Galvamand?”

“Not by the street,” Gry said.

They both looked at me, and I said, “By the Embankments.” They didn’t know what I meant. “I don’t want to stay here,” I said.

“Lead on,” said Orrec.

“Should we wait till dark?” Gry asked.

“It’ll be all right under the trees.” I pointed up the canal to where great willows stooped out over the bank. I was desperate to get home. I feared for my lord, for Galvamand. I had to be there. I set out, keeping away from the water and close to the wall, and soon we were under the willows. A couple of times we stopped to look back, but there was nothing to be seen from down here but the backs of the houses on the bridge, and across the canal, the wall and treetops and rooftops. No sound came to us from the streets. The air was thick, and I thought I smelled smoke.

We came to the Embankments, the great stone walls like fortresses that hold and divide the River Sundis where it comes out of the hills. Like all the children of Ansul I had played on the Embankments, climbing the steep steps cut into the walls, leaping the gaps, running across the narrow bridges of chained planks that connect the banks for the use of workmen and dredgers. Our game then was to dare one child to cross the plank bridge while the others jumped on it so that it bounced up and down wildly in the water. Our game now was to dare Shetar to cross. She took one look at the flimsy set of planks with water slipping and sliding over them, and crouched with her shoulders up and her tail down, saying very clearly, *No*.

Gry immediately sat down beside her and put a hand on her head behind the ears. She and Shetar seemed to be having a discussion. I saw that much, but in my haste I’d already started across the bridge. Once you start you can’t stop, keeping going is the whole trick of it. I went on across and then stood on the far bank, feeling foolish and desperate, until I saw Gry and Shetar both get up, and set out across the canal—Gry stepping steadily from plank to plank, and the lion swimming beside her, holding her fierce head clear of the water. Orrec followed Gry.

Once on shore Shetar shook herself, but cats can’t shake water off like dogs. Her coat was black with wet in the twilight, and she looked shrunken, lean, and small. She showed her white teeth in a mighty snarl.

“There’s another bridge and a boat,” I said.

“Lead on,” Orrec said.

I led them across the abutment to the East Canal; we crossed that as we had crossed the other; then up by the steep narrow side-cut stairs onto the great wedge-shaped abutment that separates the East Canal from the river itself, across it, and down again to the river. By then it was getting quite dark. We crossed the river on the line ferry that is always there. The boat was on our side; we got in and pulled across. The current is strong, and it took both Orrec and me to haul us. Shetar did not want to get into the boat, did not want to be in the boat, and growled all the way across, sometimes making a short coughing roar. She was shivering with cold or fear or rage. Gry talked to her now and then, but mostly just kept a hand on her head behind the ears.

The line ferry landing is at the foot of the old park. Gry took the leash off and Shetar leapt up into the darkness of the woods and vanished. We followed her, finding our way through the trees, up to the paths where Gry and Shetar and I had walked, and so down again to Galvamand, coming at it from the northeast. The lion ran before us like a shadow in the shadows. The house stood huge, dark, and silent as a hill.

I thought in panic, It's dead, they're dead.

I ran ahead of the others across the court, into the house, calling out. There was no answer. I ran through the Waylord's apartments, all in darkness, and on back to the secret room. My hand shook so that I could barely write the words to open the door. There was no light in the room but the faint glimmer of the skylights. No one was there. No one but the books that spoke, the presence in the cave.

I closed the door and raced back through the dark corridors and galleries to the part of the house where people lived. There was a gleam of warm light across the great court. They were all gathered in the pantry where we ate—the Waylord, Gudit, Ista, Sosta, and Bomi, and Gry and Orrec had joined them there. I stopped short in the doorway. The Waylord came to me and took me for a moment in his arms. "Child, child," he said. And I clung to him with all my strength.

We sat round the table; Ista insisted that we eat the bread and meat she had set out, and in fact I was ravenous. We told one another what we knew.

Gudit had been over at a beer house near the Central Canal where he and his old friends, all stablemen, hostlers, grooms, used to meet and sit and talk slowly about horses. "All of a sudden," he said, "we heard a lot of

noise, up on the Council Hill. Then there was smoke rising, a great black fume of smoke." Trumpets were blown, and Ald soldiers, mounted and afoot, came rushing past, all heading up along Council Way. Gudit and his friends made their way as far as Galva Street, but a big crowd was already there at the entrance to the Council House square, both Alds and citizens, "yelling and carrying on, and the Alds had their swords out," he said. "I don't like crowds. I decided to go home. It stood to reason."

He tried to go along Galva Street, but the way was blocked by mobs of citizens, and there seemed to be fighting ahead. He had to go round by Gelb Street to West Street. Over on our side of town things seemed quieter, but he saw people heading towards the Council House; and as he came up to Galvamand a troop of mounted Alds went by at the gallop, swinging their swords in the air and shouting, "Out of the streets! Into your houses! Clear the streets!"

We confirmed that there had indeed been fighting on Galva Street, at Goldsmiths' Bridge, and a man thrown to his death from the bridge.

A friend of Bomi's had come running in soon after Gudit came home, reporting that "everybody said" the Council House was on fire. But a neighbor running home said it was the Alds' big tent in the Council courtyard that had been set afire, and the Alds' king had burned up inside it with a lot of the red priests.

Beyond this there was no news, for nobody dared go out in the street, in the dark, with Ald soldiers all over the place.

Ista was very frightened. I think the terrors of the fall of the city seventeen years ago came back to her that night and overwhelmed her. She set out food for us and ordered us to eat, but she didn't eat a bite herself, and her hands trembled so that she hid them on her lap.

The Waylord ordered her and the girls to bed, telling them that Orrec and Gry would be guarding the front of the house. "With the lion," he said. "You needn't worry. Nobody is going to get past the lion."

Ista nodded meekly.

"And Gudit is with the horses, as always. And Memer and I will keep watch in the old rooms. It may be a friend will come by in the night and bring us news. I hope so." He spoke so mildly and cheerfully that Ista and the girls took heart, or at least pretended to. When we'd cleaned up the kitchen they went off together with brave good-nights. They had seen Gry

posted at the top of the front steps, just inside the great door, where she and Shetar could see anything and anybody that came along the street or entered the front court. Orrec made himself the link among the rest of us, checking in with Gudit now and then, and with the Waylord, and patrolling the deserted south side of the house.

For we all dreaded the same thing, more or less obscurely: that Galvamand would again be the target of the Alds' fear or revenge.

The hours of the night passed quietly. I went up several times to the Master's rooms, where I could look out over the city. There was no sign of anything unusual. The slope of the hill hides the Council House from us; I peered that way to see smoke rising or the glow of fire, but there was nothing. I came down again to rejoin the Waylord in the long gallery. We talked a little, then we sat in silence. The night was warm, a soft night of early summer. I intended to go back up to the upstairs windows, but I was sound asleep in my chair when voices roused me.

I jumped up in terror. There was a man at the far end of the room, standing in the courtyard doorway. "Can I stay, can you hide me?"

"Yes, yes," the Waylord said. "Come in. Is there anyone with you? Come in. You'll be safe here. Did anyone follow you?" He spoke in a mild, peaceable tone, with no urgency to his questions. He drew the man into the room. I ran past them to see if anyone else was there. I saw someone standing out in the courtyard, a dark form in starlight, and almost cried out in warning—but it was Orrec.

"Fugitive," he whispered.

"Did anybody follow him?"

"Not that I can see. I'll go back round. Keep watch here, Memer."

He went quickly back through the arcade. I stood in the doorway, watching out, and listening to the Waylord and the fugitive.

"Dead," the man was saying, in a hoarse whisper. He kept coughing as he spoke. "They're all dead."

"Desac?"

"Dead. All of them."

"Did they attack the Council House?"

"The tent," the man said, shaking his head. "The fire—" He broke into violent coughing. The Waylord brought him water from the carafe on the table and made him sit down to drink it. He sat near the lamp, and I could

see him. I didn’t know him, he wasn’t one of the people who came to the house. He was a man of thirty or so, his hair wild, his clothes and face smeared with dirt or ash or blood. They were, I realised, the striped clothes worn by slaves serving at the Palace. He sat crouched in the chair, struggling to get his breath.

“They set fire to the tent,” the Waylord said.

The man nodded.

“The Gand was in it? Ioratth?”

Again he nodded. “Dead, they’re all dead. It burned like straw, it was like a bonfire, it burned . . .”

“But Desac wasn’t in the tent, was he?— No, drink some more water, tell me later. How should I call you?”

“Cader Antro,” the man said.

“Of Gelbmand,” the Waylord said. “I knew your father, Antro the blacksmith. The Gelbs used to lend me horses when I was Waylord. Your father was very particular about their shoes. Is he still alive, Cader?”

“He died last year,” the man said. He drank off the water and sat exhausted and dazed, staring in front of him.

“We set the fire and got out,” he said, “but they were there, they came round us, they pushed us back, back into the fire. Everybody screaming and pushing. I got out. I crawled out.” He looked down at himself with bewilderment.

“Were you burned? Hurt?” The Waylord went closer to look him over, and touched his forearm. “You’re burned there, or cut. Let’s have a look at it. But first, tell me how you got here, to Galvamand? Were you alone?”

“I crawled out,” Cader repeated. He was not in the quiet room with us, he was in the fire. “I crawled . . . I got over above the East Canal, I jumped down. They were fighting back there, all over the square, killing people. I went . . . down . . . Clear to the seafront. There were guards riding down all the streets. I hid behind the houses. I didn’t know where to go. I thought they might come here. To the Oracle House. I didn’t know where to go.”

“You did quite right,” the Waylord said in the same soothing and matter-of-fact tone. “Let me get a better light here and have a look at that arm. Memer? Would you bring me more water, and a cloth?”

I didn’t want to leave my guard post, but it did seem that the man had come alone and unpursued. I fetched a basin and water, cloths and the

herbal salve we kept for kitchen burns and cuts; and I cleaned and dressed the burn on Cader's arm, my hands being defter at such work than the Waylord's. After being looked after, and drinking a little cup of the old brandy the Waylord kept for the Feast of Ennu and for emergencies, Cader seemed less dazed. He thanked us and haltingly asked blessing on the house.

The Waylord asked him a few more questions, but he was unable to tell us much more. A small group of Desac's people—some of them slaves of the Alds and some like Cader posing as slaves—had infiltrated the great tent and set fire to it at several places while the ceremony was going on. But the plan went wrong. "They didn't come," Cader kept saying. Some of the conspirators, like Cader and Desac, were caught leaving the burning tent; others, who were to be waiting in the square to strike down the Alds as they fled from the fire, had themselves been struck down, or had not been able to get anywhere near the tent—Cader did not know which. He began to weep as he tried to talk about it, and to cough again. "Come, come on, enough," the Waylord told him, "you need to sleep." And he took him off to his own room and left him there.

When he came back I asked him, "Do you think they're all dead? Desac, the Gand? What about the Gand's son? He was there, in the tent."

The Waylord shook his head. "We don't know."

"If Ioratth is dead and Iddor is alive, he'll take over, he'll rule," I said.

"Yes."

"He'll come here."

"Why here?"

"For the same reason Cader came here. Because this is the heart of everything in Ansul."

The Waylord, standing in the doorway looking out at the starlit court, said nothing.

"You should go to the room," I said. "You should be there."

"To the oracle?"

"To be safe."

"Oh," he said, with a little laugh, "safe . . . Maybe I will yet. But let's wait out the darkness and see what daylight brings."

It was still not daylight, though, when looking from the upper windows I saw a fire, southwest of us, down somewhere near the ruined university

buildings. It glowed, died down, blazed up again. There were sounds of unrest, horses clattering down distant streets, a trumpet call, faint troubling sounds of voices, many voices. Whatever the disaster in Council Square had been, the city was not cowed or pacified.

Just as the darkness began to grey and the sky to lighten above the hills behind the city, Orrec came in. With him was Sulsem Cam of Cammand, a lifelong friend of the Waylord, a fellow scholar, who had brought many rescued books to Galvamand. Now he brought news.

"Hearsay is all we have, Sulter," he said. He was a man of sixty or so, courteous, cautious, very mindful of his own and others' dignity—"a Cam through and through," the Waylord called him. Even now he spoke quite precisely. "But we have it from more than one source. The Gand Ioratth is dead. His son Iddor rules. A great many of our people are dead. Desac the southerner and my kinsman Armo died in the fire in the great tent. The Alds still have the city in their grip. Riots and fires and street fighting have broken out all night here and there. People are stoning the soldiers from roofs and windows as they pass. But the attacks on the Alds have no leader that we know of. They're random, scattered. The Alds have an army, we have not."

I remembered someone saying that, days ago it seemed, months ago; who had said it?

"Let Iddor be certain of his army, then," the Waylord said. "We have a city, they do not."

"Bravely said. But Sulter, I am afraid for you. For your household."

"I know it, my friend. I know that's why you came here, at risk to yourself. I am grateful. May all the gods and spirits of my house and yours go with you: and go home now, before it's daylight!"

They clasped each other's hands, and Sulsem Cam went back as he had come.

The Waylord went to check on the fugitive, who was fast asleep, then out to the little basin fountain in the back atrium to wash, as he did every morning, and then he began the rounds of the daily worship, as he did every morning. At first I thought I couldn't possibly do the worship, but it seemed to draw me. I went out and picked Iene's leaves and put them at her altar, and started round to all the god-niches to dust them and say the blessings.

Ista was up and bustling in the kitchen. She said the girls were still asleep, having been awake half the night. Going towards the front of the house I heard voices in the great inner courtyard.

Gry stood on the far side, talking with a woman. The first sunlight was just striking the roofs above the open courtyard, and the air was sweet and summer-cool; the two women stood by the wall in shadow, one in white, one in grey, under a flowering vine, like figures in a painting. Everything was charged, intense, vivid.

I crossed over to them. “This is Ialba Actamo,” Gry said to me, and to the woman, “This is Memer Galva.”

Ialba was small, slight, a delicate woman in her thirties, with keen eyes. She wore the pale striped dress of the Palace slaves. We greeted each other cautiously.

“Ialba brings us news from the Palace,” Gry said.

“Tirio Actamo sends me,” the woman said. “I bring word of the Gand Ioratth.”

“He’s dead?”

She shook her head. “He is not. He was hurt in the attack and the fire. His son had him carried into the Palace and told the soldiers he was dying. We think he’ll announce his death. But he’s not dead! The priests took him to the prison there. With my lady. She’s with him there. If Iddor kills him, she’ll die with him. If the officers knew he was alive they might rescue them. But there’s no one I can speak to there—I hid all night, I came here by the hill paths— My lady said to go to the Waylord, tell the Waylord he is not dead.” Her voice was level, light, and even, but I realised that she was shaking, her whole body shivering, quivering, as she spoke.

“You’re cold,” I said. “You’ve been out all night. Come to the kitchen.”

And she came meekly with me.

When I said her name to Ista, Ista looked her over and said, “You’re Benem’s daughter. I was at your mother’s wedding. We were friends, your mother and I. You were always Lady Tirio’s favorite, when you were just a child, I remember that. Sit down, sit down, I’ll have something hot here in just a moment. Why, your clothes are all wet! Memer! Take the girl to my room and find her some dry clothes!”

While I did that, Gry ran back to give Ialba’s news to the Waylord and Orrec; and I rejoined them soon, leaving Ialba in good hands. I brought

with me a basket of bread and cheese, for I was hungry and thought the others might be too. We sat and ate and talked—what did the news Ialba carried mean, what could we do? “We need to know what is going on!” the Waylord said in frustration, and Orrec said, “I’ll go and find out.”

“Don’t you show your nose in the streets,” Gry said fiercely. “Everybody knows you! I’ll go.”

“They know you, too,” he said.

“Nobody knows me,” I said. I swallowed a last mouthful of bread and cheese and stood up.

“Everybody in this city knows everybody else,” Orrec said, which was more or less true. But my being recognised as the half-blood boy or girl who did the shopping for Galvamand was no great danger, and to the Ald soldiers I was completely insignificant.

“Memer, you should be here,” the Waylord said.

If he had commanded me to stay I would have obeyed, but it was a protest rather than a command, or so I took it. “I will be careful, and I’ll be back in an hour,” I said. I had already changed into boy’s clothing, and now I let my hair down and tied it back and started out, leaving by the north courtyard. Gry followed me and gave me a hug. “Be careful, lion,” she murmured.

Chapter 12

I LOOKED IN at the stables. Gudit was walking Branty round the court, scowling; he nodded to me. He had set out pitchforks and other tools ready to use as weapons. He would die defending the stable, the horses, Galvamand. As I crossed the forecourt, still shadowed by the house and the rise of the hills, my breath stuck in my throat, because I saw the old man with his bald head and his hunched back and his pitchfork facing a cavalry troop with lances and bare swords, and I saw him cut down, I saw him die. Like the heroes of old. Like the warriors of Sul.

Galva Street lay empty before and behind me as I crossed the North Canal Bridge. The city seemed very silent. Again my breath caught: was it a deathly silence, despite the sweet morning sunlight and the scent of flowering trees? Where were my people?

I turned and cut through the back ways past Gelbmand and over by Old Street, heading for the Harbor Market. I didn't dare go towards Council Hill. I was nearly at the marketplace, and still spooked by the silence of the city, when I heard shouting, some way off, towards Council Way, and then the repeated summons of a shrill Ald trumpet. I ran back up West Street, out in the open, since there was no one about, until I got back to Gelb Street. Down it came a couple of Ald horsemen, just as Bomi had described them, riding at a canter, waving bared swords, shouting, "Clear the streets! Into your houses!"

I ducked behind a broken shrine of Ennu, and they didn't see me. They rode on, and soon I heard the hoofbeats and the distant shouts on the Downway, passing the Foothill Market. I touched the sill of the shrine and said the blessing and went on the byways between houses back up to Galvamand. I had hoped to join a crowd and be invisible and learn what was going on, but there were no crowds. Only soldiers. That was all I had learned, and it was heavy news.

Gry and Shetar were waiting for me at the front door of Galvamand. Four men had come to the back of the house, she said, all of them known to the Waylord, all of them members of Desac's conspiracy. They had been posted, yesterday, on the East Canal with a force that was to attack the Alds in the Council House courtyard when the great tent was set afire; but not all of them had got there when the fire started, earlier than planned. The Ald soldiers had been very quick to gather and defend themselves, and soon took the offensive. The rebel force was broken apart and men were cut down as they tried to escape. They had scattered out over the city. These four spent the night first hiding in the ruins of the university, then making guerrilla attacks on Ald troops. They made their way to Galvamand because the word was all over the city that whoever wanted to fight for Ansul should go there, to the Waylord's house, the House of the Oracle.

"For refuge? Or to make a stand?" I asked Gry.

"I don't know. They don't know," she said. "Look."

A troop of seven or eight men came running round the corner from West Street towards us. They were citizens, not Alds. One of them had a bandaged arm and they all looked fairly desperate. I went out on the steps and faced them. "Are you coming here?" I called.

"The Alds are coming here," the one in the lead answered. He stopped at the Sill Stone and touched it. "Blessing on the souls of the household, living and having lived. The soldiers at the Council House—they'll be here soon. So we're told. Tell the Waylord to lock his doors!"

"I doubt he will," I said. "Will you help us guard them?"

"That's what we're here for," he said. The others were coming up and touching the Sill Stone. One of them said, "There's the lion, look."

"Will you come in?" I said.

"No, we'll stay here and wait for them, I think," the leader said. He was a dark-faced fellow; he had lost his hair tie, and his mane of long black hair made him look wild, but he spoke quietly. "There'll be others coming. If you had any water, though . . ." He looked wistfully at the dry basin of the broken fountain.

"Go around to the side, there, to the stable," I said. "There's running water. Ask Gudit to let you in."

“I know Gudit,” one of the men said. “He’s my dad’s friend. Come on.” They trotted on round to the stable. Already another larger group was coming along the street from the other direction, from the Downway, twenty men or more, some of them armed with edge-tools, one brandishing an Ald saber. We made them welcome, and they too were thirsty, after what one of them called a hot night’s work, so we sent them around to get a drink at the stables.

At least Gudit wouldn’t be standing there alone with his pitchfork, as I had imagined him.

I ran in to tell the Waylord I was back safe and report to him that the city seemed empty, but that the forecourt of Galvamand was now getting rather crowded, and the rumor was that Ald soldiers were coming here.

This was confirmed by all the people who came. They kept arriving, a few at a time, members of Desac’s conspiracy, or men and boys who had joined them after the aborted coup at the Council Square. They all said Desac and the Gand had both died in the fire. Some said hundreds of soldiers had been killed in the square, others said the dead were almost all citizens and the Alds were as strong as ever.

As the morning went on, there were more and more women among the people who came to Galvamand, walking in groups, some with a distaff in hand, a few with a baby in a sling. One group of five old women came, all carrying stout sticks and looking about grimly. Four stooped to touch the Sill Stone; the fifth, who was crippled with arthritis and couldn’t stoop, just swept her stick across it with a short and testy blessing that sounded more like a swearword.

I stood in the doorway of the house, at the top of the steps, thinking it was like a market fair, or a recitation, or a festival—a sacred ceremony of the old days, such as I had never seen—the people of the city gathering, talking, chatting, idling, waiting, excited yet patient. . . . But they would have worn finer clothes to a festival. They would have brought flowering branches to a festival, not swords, knives, daggers, pruning hooks, sticks.

Two men with crossbows had posted themselves one on each side of the door.

There was a great noise, southward down Galva Street, in the direction of the Council House: trumpets and horns braying, drums beating, a roar of voices. The noise went on for some while, ceased, began again.

A little boy of seven or eight came running down the street, his feet flying, his hair flying. “It’s the new Gand!” he shouted. “He’s there with all the soldiers! And there’s redhats making speeches!”

Everybody gathered round him. A man took him up on his shoulders and he piped out the message he had heard, which sounded very strange in his thin, sweet voice: “The Gand Ioratth is dead, the Gand Iddor rules! All hail the Son of the Sun, the Sword of Atth, the Lord Iddor, who comes to subdue the enemies of Atth and destroy the demons of Ansul!”

Like an echo, far down the street, trumpets and horns blared out again, voices roared, drums thumped.

From the crowd round Galvamand there was a groaning mutter of response. People shifted uneasily. I saw several groups climb over the low wall into the neglected gardens across the street, getting out of harm’s way.

I turned and ran into the house again, back through court and corridor to the old rooms, where Orrec and the Waylord stood talking with Per Actamo and some other men of the Actamo household. They turned to me. I said, “Orrec, maybe you could come speak to the people.”

They all stared at me.

“The new Gand and the army are on the way here,” I said. “People don’t know what to do.”

“You should go,” the Waylord said to Orrec—not meaning go out to the people, but meaning go up into the hills, escape. “Now.”

“No, no,” Orrec said. He put his hand on the Waylord’s arm.

They both held still, silent, for a moment. Then the Waylord turned away.

“It will all be gone,” he said aloud in utter despair and grief. “The books lost, the makers dead.” He hid his face with his broken hands.

We all stood silent, shaken by that cry.

The Waylord looked up at last; he looked at me.

“Will you come with me, Memer? Can I save you, at least?”

I could not answer. But I could not follow him.

He saw that. He came and kissed my forehead and blessed me. Then he went off, walking very lame, to the back of the house, to the hidden room.

“Will he be safe?” Orrec asked me.

“Yes,” I said.

Even inside the walls of Galvamand we could hear the sound of the trumpets now.

With nothing further said, we all went forward through the great courtyard and the high gallery to the front doors of the house, where Gry and Shetar stood like a statue of a woman and a lion.

I went to Gry and put my arm around her, because I had to have somebody to hold. I had let my dear lord go, I had not held him, I had let him walk away alone to be safe, to live, not to be hurt again. But I had to have somebody to hold.

Gry put her arm around me. We stood there in the doorway of the house. Per Actamo and the others went outside, but Orrec kept back, behind us. He knew that if he came out on the steps and the crowd saw him, he must act, he must speak, and he was not ready to act or speak. The time had not come.

People came, still crowding into the street and the gardens across it, people of Ansul, more and more of them. I couldn't even see the grey-and-black maze of the forecourt; it was a moving pavement of people, alive as it hadn't been in all my lifetime. The crowd gathered and gathered. Galva Street itself was crowded now both north and south as far as I could see.

The trumpets sounded again, a noise that thrilled in the blood, and the drums beat nearer.

There was a wave in the crowd in the street south of us like a tidal bore driving up a canal, pushing everything before it; people shouted, screamed, clambered up onto curbs and walls, making way for the force that drove them, forced them out of the street, pushed them aside: mounted Ald guards, their curved swords slashing and sweeping the air, their horses rearing and striking out with their hoofs. They came straight through the crowd in the streets and stopped in front of Galvamand, a compact troop of fifty or more horsemen. With them, among them, defended by them, eight or ten red-clad, red-hatted priests rode close round a man in the broad, pointed hat of the Ald nobility, cloaked in flowing gold.

Behind the mounted troop many people were still in panic, trying to get out of the way, while others struggled to go to the help of those who had been struck down or trampled. There was great confusion and great fear. But all the people I could see all the way down the street were men and

women of Ansul. If there were more soldiers coming behind the cavalry, they had not made their way through the crowd.

A circle of emptiness had formed all round the cavalry troop in the forecourt, like the space that had been round Gry and Shetar that first morning at the market, but much larger. I could see the figures of the maze on the pavement inside the circle of snorting, fidgeting horses.

The group of redhat priests rode forward to the steps of the house, and the man in gold rode forward from among them. It was the Gand's son Iddor, the big, handsome man. The cloak he wore shone like the sunlight itself. He stood in the stirrups and raised his sword high. He shouted out words which I could not hear over the shouting of his soldiers and the strange noise of the crowd, the groaning roar.

Then all at once all sounds nearby died out, leaving only the noise of the crowds farther away, who could not see what was happening.

What I saw, what the soldiers and the nearby crowd and Iddor saw, was Gry, who came out of the door with Shetar, unleashed, beside her. Woman and lion paced forward and descended the wide steps slowly, walking straight at Iddor.

And he drew back.

Maybe he couldn't keep his horse from flinching, maybe he pulled the reins: the white horse and its gold-cloaked, dazzling rider drew back a step, and back a step again.

Gry stood still and the lion stood motionless beside her, snarling.

"You cannot come into this house," Gry said.

Iddor was silent.

A little, soft, jeering whisper began to run through the crowd.

Down the street, far down, a trumpet sounded. It broke the paralysis. Iddor's horse backed again and then stood steady. Iddor stood in the stirrups and shouted out in a powerful voice: "The Gand Ioratth is dead, murdered by rebels and traitors! I, his heir, Iddor, Gand of Ansul, claim vengeance. I declare this house accursed. It will be destroyed, its stones will fall, and all its demons will perish with it. The Mouth of Evil will be stopped and silenced. The one God will reign in Ansul! God is with us! God is with us! God is with us!"

The soldiers shouted those last words with him. But then their shouts went ragged, as another sound began, a murmur that spread and spread

through the crowd: “Look! Look! Look at the fountain!”

I was still standing in the doorway, between the crossbowmen who guarded the door of Galvamand, their bows ready to fire, both aimed at Iddor. A man had come to stand beside me there. I thought it was Orrec, then I did not know who it was, a tall man, his hand held out, pointing straight at the Oracle Fountain. The basin with its broken jet was just within the empty circle of the guards.

I saw him then. I saw him, for once, as he had been, and as my heart had always known him: a tall, straight, beautiful man, smiling, with fire in his eyes. I followed his pointing hand and saw what the people below were seeing—a thin jet of water that leapt up into the light. It poised there and fell away to crash with a silvery racket in the dry basin. It sank, leapt up again, higher and stronger, and the voice of the falling water filled the air.

“The fountain,” people cried, “the Oracle Fountain!” There was a movement forward, pressing in on the cavalrymen, as people tried to see better or to reach the fountain itself. An officer shouted an order, and the horsemen began to turn their horses outward to face the crowd. But their close ranks had been broken, and the officer’s voice was lost in a new roar of sound.

The Waylord put his hand on my shoulder and said, “Come with me, Memer.”

Gry and Shetar had drawn aside, on the steps above to the fountain. I went with the Waylord out onto the broad top step, where he halted and spoke.

“Iddor of Medron, son of Ioratth,” the Waylord said, and his voice was like Orrec’s, it filled the air, it commanded the ear, it held the mind, and the great crowd was still— “You lie. Your father lives. You imprisoned him and falsely claimed his power. You betray your father, you betray your soldiers who serve you faithfully, you betray your god. Atth is not with you. He abhors the traitor. And this house will not fall. This is the House of the Fountain, and the Lord of the Springs protects it, sending it the blessing of his waters. This is the House of the Oracle, and in the books of this house your fate and ours is written!”

He had in his left hand a book, a small one, and he held it up now as he strode down the steps. He was not lame, he was lithe and quick. I went beside him. I saw Shetar’s laughing snarl as we passed her. We stopped a

few steps above the pavement, so our faces were on a level with Iddor's as he sat on his nervous horse. The Waylord held the book up, open, right in Iddor's face. I could see the man in the shining cloak control himself, force himself not to flinch away from it.

"Can you read it, son of Ioratth? No? Then it will be read to you!"

And then there was a ringing in my ears. I cannot truly say what it was I heard, nor can anyone who was there that morning, but it seemed to me that a voice cried out, a loud, strange voice that rang out all around us, over the forecourt where the fountain leapt, and rang echoing off the walls of Galvamand. Some say it was the book itself that cried out, and I think it was. Some say that it was I, that it was my voice. I know I read no words in that book—I could not see its pages. I don't know whose voice it was that cried out. I don't know that it was not mine.

The words I heard were, *Let them set free!*

But others heard other words. And some heard only the crashing water of the fountain in the great silence of the crowd.

What Iddor heard I don't know.

He shuddered away from the book, crouching in the saddle and hunching his shoulders as if against something that struck at him. His hands must have tightened on the reins to urge his horse forward or pull it back, but awkwardly, so that the horse reared up and bucked, unseating him. The shining figure in cloth of gold jerked and slipped and slithered down and staggered on the ground, while the squealing horse backed away and away, half dragging him with it. We stood still on the steps; Gry and Shetar had come to stand with us, and Orrec had joined us.

The priests closed in around Iddor, some trying to assist him from horseback, others dismounting. Across this knot of confusion the Waylord's voice rang clearly: "Men of Asudar, soldiers of the Gand Ioratth, your lord is held prisoner in the Palace. Will you go set him free?"

Then it was Orrec whose voice rang out. "People of Ansul! Shall we see justice done? Shall we go free the prisoner and the slaves? Shall we take freedom into our own hands?"

A wild yell went up at that, and the crowd began to surge down the street towards the Council House. "Lero! Lero! Lero!"—the deep chant ran through them. They flowed around the cavalrymen like the sea flowing around rocks. The officer shouted out orders, the trumpet blew a brief

command, and the horsemen, some moving in a body and some straggling behind, all began to go with the crowd, amid them, borne with them, down Galva Street towards the Council House.

The red-hatted priests had got Iddor back up on his horse. Shouting to one another, they followed the mass of the crowd. None of the soldiers that had escorted them had waited for them.

Orrec spoke briefly with Gry and now rejoined Per Actamo and the small group of men who had come to stand with the Waylord and me on the steps. “Go, follow them!” the Waylord said urgently, and Orrec and the others set off after Iddor and the priests.

Not all the crowd joined in the rush down Galva Street to the Palace. People stayed in the street and on the forecourt, many of them women and older people. They all seemed both drawn to and awed by that high jet of water and the lame man who now hobbled down the steps to the basin and sat down awkwardly on its broad rim.

He was as I had always known him, not straight and tall but bent and lame, but he was my heart’s lord then and always.

He looked up at the leap and spray of the jet catching the morning sunlight above the shadow of the house. His face shone with water or tears. He reached down and laid his hand on the water, still rising in the wide stone bowl. I had followed him and stood close by him. He was whispering the praise to Lero and the Lord of the Springs, over and over. People rather timidly gathered at the fountain’s rim, and they too touched the water, and looked up at the sunlit jet, and spoke to the gods of Ansul.

Gry came to me, holding Shetar now on a close leash, often putting a hand on her head; the lion was still snarling and yawning, still excited and enraged by the noise, the crowds. I saw why Gry had not tried to follow Orrec, though I knew she must long to. I said, “Gry, I can keep Shetar here.”

“You should go,” she said.

I shook my head. “I stay here,” I said. Those words came from my own heart, in my own voice, and I smiled with joy as I said them.

I looked up at the column of water that leapt from the cylinder of bronze and towered high, breaking into a great bright-showering blossom at the top. The silvery crash and racket of its fall were wonderful. I sat down on the broad green lip of the basin and did as the Waylord did: I put my hands

on the water and in it, and let the spray fall on my face, and gave thanks and praise to the gods and shadows and spirits of my house and city.

Gudit came around the corner of the courtyard. He carried a pitchfork. He halted and looked around at the scattered, quiet people.

“They gone, then?”

“To the Palace—the Council House,” Gry called back.

“Stands to reason,” the old man said. He turned and started to trudge back to the stables; then he turned again and stared at the fountain.

“Merciful Ennu,” he said at last. “She’s running again!” He scratched his cheek, stared a while longer, and went back to his horses.

Chapter 13

I CAN TELL what happened at the Council House as Orrec and Per Actamo told us afterwards. The troop of priests surrounding Iddor forced their way forward through the crowd in Galva Street. Orrec and Per managed to keep directly behind them. When they came to the Council Square, the soldiers guarding it shouted, “Let the Gand Iddor pass!” and began to open the way for the troop of priests. But Iddor and his redhats rode straight past, gaining speed as the crowd thinned out. Orrec thought they were making for the Isma Bridge to escape from the city, but they were circling round the back of the Council House to get to the entrance door on the far side, above the Alds’ barracks. Soldiers guarded the four-foot-high stone wall that marked off the back court. At Iddor’s shouted command, they opened the gate, and the troop of priests galloped in.

But with them came a mob of citizens, who had joined Orrec and Per following the priests past the entrance to the square. Soldiers attacked the citizens as they came pushing in the open gate and swarming over the wall, and citizens mobbed the soldiers. Iddor and his redhats broke through the confusion, leapt off their horses, and made straight for the back door of the Council House. Orrec and Per kept right behind them through the melee—the tail of the comet, Orrec said.

Before they knew what was happening they were inside the Council House, still on the heels of Iddor and the priests, who were so intent on getting where they were going that they paid no attention to their pursuers. They all raced through a high hallway and down a flight of stairs. At the foot of the stairs was a basement corridor dimly lit by small windows high in the wall at ground level. Where this corridor opened into a large, low guardroom, the priests and Iddor halted, shouting orders—at guards posted there, or at an opposing force coming from the square? Orrec said it was

all shouting and confusion for a while, Alds yelling at Alds. He and Per had held back; now they went forward cautiously to the doorway.

The red-hatted priests and a troop of soldiers stood facing each other, the officers demanding to see the Gand Ioratth, the priests saying, “The Gand is dead! You cannot defile the rites of mourning!” The priests had their backs against a door and stood firm. Iddor was barely visible among them. He had cast off his golden hat and cloak somewhere. A priest advanced on the officers, formidable in his tall red hat and robes, his arms raised, shouting that if they did not disperse he would curse them in the name of Atth. The soldiers drew back from him, cowed.

Then all at once Orrec strode straight at the priest, shouting, “Ioratth is alive! He is alive in that room! The oracle has spoken! Open the door of the prison, priests!” Or so Per reported his words. Orrec himself recalled only shouting out that Ioratth was not dead, and then the officers shouting, “Open the door! Open the door!” And then, he told us, “I ducked back out of it,” for swords and daggers flashed out on both sides, the soldiers attacking the priests who defended the door, driving them away and down the farther corridor. An officer sprang forward and unbolted and flung open the door.

The room beyond was black, unlighted. In the glimmer of lantern light in the doorway a wraith appeared, a white figure out of the darkness.

She wore the striped gown of an Ald slave, torn and streaked with filth and blood. Her face was bruised, one eye swollen shut, and her scalp covered with blackened, clotted blood where her hair had been torn out by handfuls. She gripped a broken stake in her hand. She stood there, Orrec said, like a candle flame, luminous, trembling.

Then she saw the man who stood beside Orrec, Per Actamo, and her face slowly changed. “Cousin,” she said.

“Lady Tirio,” Per said. “We’re here to set the Gand Ioratth free.”

“Come in, then,” she said. Orrec said she spoke as gently and civilly as if she were welcoming guests into her home.

The struggle in the corridor had intensified and then quieted. One of the soldiers brought in a lantern from the guardroom, and light and shadow leapt round the officers as they entered the prison chamber. Per and Orrec followed them. It was a large, low room, earth-floored, with a foul, damp, heavy smell. Ioratth lay on a long chest or table, his arms and legs

chained. His hair and clothing were blackened and half burnt away, and his legs and feet were bloody and crusted with burns. He reared up his head and said in a voice like a wire brush on brass, “Let me loose!”

While his officers were busy getting the chains off him, he saw Orrec and stared. “Maker! How did you get here?”

“Following your son,” Orrec said.

At that Ioratth glared round and wheezed out in his smoke-ruined voice, “Where is he? Where is he?”

Orrec, Per, and the officers looked round, ran back to the guardroom. Four priests were being held there by soldiers. The rest were gone, Iddor with them.

“My lord Gand,” said one of the officers, “we’ll find him. But if now—if you’d show yourself to the troops, my lord—They believe you’re dead—”

“Hurry up, then!” Ioratth growled.

As soon as they freed his arms he reached out and caught the hand of the woman who stood silent beside him.

When they got his legs free he tried to stand up, but his burnt feet would not bear his weight; he cursed and sat back down abruptly, still gripping Tirio Actamo’s hand. The officers grouped round to carry him in a chair hold. “With her,” he said, gesturing impatiently. “With them!” gesturing at Orrec and Per.

So the whole group stayed together as they went up the stairs to the high gallery that encircles the Council Chamber and along it to the front of the great building, through its anteroom. They came out into blazing sunlight under the columns of the portico, on the speakers’ terrace that looks out over the Council Square.

The whole vast expanse of the square was a mass of people, and more still were pushing into it from every entrance, a greater number of people than Orrec had ever seen, the citizens outnumbering the Ald forces by thousands.

When Iddor, the man they thought their new lord and general, had ridden on past the entrance from Council Way with no signal to them, the bewildered soldiers began to heed the growing rumor that the Gand Ioratth was alive. Confused, divided in allegiance, some turning on others as traitors to Ioratth or to Iddor, they had broken ranks. Citizens had pushed

into the square, armed with whatever they had. Before real fighting began, realising how outnumbered they were, the officers quickly rallied the soldiers and pulled them together out of the crowd. Most of the Alds now stood on the steps of the Council House and the pavement in front of it. In their blue cloaks, they formed a solid half circle facing the Ansul crowd, their swords bared, not threatening attack directly but not yielding.

The crowd, though tumultuous, kept back, leaving a ragged no-man's-land between their front ranks and the soldiers.

"There was an awful stink of burning," Orrec told us. "Vile—hard to breathe. The air was full of dust, fine black dust, hanging there, the ash and cinders the crowd had trodden and trampled and kicked into the air. And I saw a strange thing sticking up out of that roil and press of people. It looked like the prow of a wrecked ship. I realised at last it was part of the frame of the great tent, with burnt canvas clinging to it. And there were whirlpools in the sea of people, places where men who'd been killed or wounded in the rush into the square were lying, while some people still pressed on past them and others stopped to protect them. And the noise, I didn't know human beings could make a noise like that, it was terrifying, it never ceased, a kind of huge howling . . ."

He thought he could not force himself to go forward and stand facing that mob. His head swam with panic. The officers he was with were also clearly frightened and uncertain, but they carried their Gand forward staunchly. And they shouted out, "The Gand Ioratth! He lives!"

The soldiers below turned, stared up, saw him, and began to shout, "He lives!"

Ioratth was saying irritably to the men carrying him, "Put me down!" and they finally obeyed. He got a firm grip on the arm of one of them with one hand, and on Tirio's shoulder with the other. He managed to take a step forward, grimacing with pain, and to stand there facing the crowd. The roar of his soldiers' salute dominated the bellowing of the crowd for a while, but soon the terrible noise was growing again, drowning the shouts of "He lives!" in shouts of "Death to the tyrant! Death to the Alds!"

Ioratth raised his hand. The authority of that ragged, fire-scarred, shaky figure brought silence. And he spoke— "Soldiers of Asudar, citizens of Ansul!"

But his smoke-hoarsened voice did not carry. They could not hear him. One of the officers stepped forward, but Ioratth ordered him back. “Him, him!” he said, gesturing Orrec forward. “They’ll listen to him! Talk to them, Maker. Quiet them down.”

The crowd saw Orrec then, and a roar went up from them. They shouted, “Lero! Lero!” and “Liberty!”

Amid that tumult, Orrec said to Ioratth, “If I speak to them, I speak for them.”

The Gand nodded impatiently.

So Orrec raised his hand for silence, and a rumbling, muttering silence spread out through the huge mob.

He told us that he’d had no idea what he would say from one word to the next, and couldn’t remember what he said. Others remembered well, and wrote down his words later: “People of Ansul, we have seen the water of the dead fountain run. We have heard the voice that was silent speak. The oracle bade us set free. And so we have done this day. We have set free the master, we have set free the slave. Let the men of Asudar know they have no slaves, let the people of Ansul know they have no masters. Let the Alds keep peace and Ansul will keep peace with them. Let them sue for alliance and we will grant them alliance. In living token of that peace and that alliance, hear Tirio Actamo, citizen of Ansul, wife of the Gand Ioratth!”

If the Gand was taken aback, it didn’t show on his battered, sooty face; he stood there, not able to do much more than keep standing, holding on to Tirio while she spoke. Her voice was clear and valiant but very frail, and all the crowd in the square went silent to hear her, though there was still a hoarse continual tumult of noise from all the nearby streets.

“May the gods of Ansul be blessed again, who will bless us with peace,” she said. “This is our city. Let us hold it as we always held it, lawfully. Let us be a free people once again. Luck and Lero and all our gods be with us!”

The deep chant of “Lero! Lero!” rose up from the crowd following on her words. Then a man broke forward from the crowd, shouting out, “Give us our city! Give us back our Council House!”

Those who were there said that was the most dangerous moment of all: if the crowd had simply pressed forward in its huge irresistible force to occupy the Council House and had met the army standing firm, they would

have fought, and Ald soldiers fight to the death. It was Ioratth who prevented a slaughter, rasping out orders to his officers, who shouted them full voice and relayed them by trumpet calls, rallying the soldiers and shifting the whole mass of them rapidly over from the Council House steps to the area east of it, clearing the steps for the wild crowd who had begun to flood up and surge into the building. It was the soldiers' discipline, Orrec said, that saved them and the thousands of citizens who would have died in such a battle. The Gand's order had been, "Down arms," and after that not one soldier raised his sword even when shoved, struck, or pushed aside by exultant, vengeful civilians.

To escape the onrush of the mob, Orrec and Per stayed with the knot of officers, who chair-lifted Ioratth again and ran with him to the east end of the terrace and down the side steps to join the ranks that were reforming there. Tirio, Per, and Orrec followed them. A litter was fetched for the Gand. When they got him settled, he promptly summoned Orrec.

"Well said, Maker," he said, half audible, with a kind of grim salute. "But I have no authority to make an alliance with Ansul."

"Best obtain it, my lord," said Tirio Actamo in her silvery voice.

The old Gand looked up at her. Evidently he saw her bruises, her puffed eye, her torn hair and blood-clotted scalp clearly for the first time. He sat up staring, glaring, shouting in a whisper, "The damned—the damned traitor—Atth strike him dead! Where is he?"

The officers looked at one another.

"Find him!" wheezed the Gand, and began to cough.

Tirio Actamo knelt beside the litter and put her hand on his. "Ioratth, you must be quiet a while," she said.

He laughed through his coughing and gripped her hand. Looking up at Orrec, he said, "Married us, did you?"

IT SEEMED A LONG time before Orrec came back to us at Galvamand, yet it was still early afternoon of that day that had already been as long as a year.

The Waylord had come in at my urging for some food and a brief rest, but then he returned to the reception hall that ran along the front of the house, called the high gallery. It had never been used in my lifetime and

had no furnishings. Its doors, the wide front doors of Galvamand, stood open now. He asked for chairs and benches to be brought, and there were plenty of willing hands to bring them, not only from other rooms but from houses nearby. He sat down there and made himself available to all who came.

And they came, dozens of people, hundreds. They came to see the Oracle Fountain run, and to hear those who had been there tell how the oracle had spoken and what it had said; that was when I first learned that not all had heard the same words, or that as the words were repeated they were changed and changed again. People came to see the Waylord, Galva the Reader, to greet him, to take counsel with him. Many who came were working men and women, others were or had been merchants, magistrates, mayors of wards of the city and members of the Council. They were all poor because we were all poor, you couldn't tell shoemakers from shipmasters by their clothes. Some of the working people came in only to bless the gods of the house and greet the Reader of the oracle with awed and joyful respect and be gone again, but others stayed along with the mayors and councillors, the merchants and members of great households, to sit and talk about what was happening and air their opinions on what could and should be done. So I first saw what it was to be a citizen, and what it was to be a waylord, too.

I stayed with him to wait on his needs and because he asked me to be there. I found it difficult, because people looked at me with awe and fear. Some of them made the gesture of worship to me. I felt utterly false and foolish, and had no idea what to say to anybody. But they had the Waylord to talk to. And fortunately I had to go to the kitchen pretty often to give a hand to Ista, who was almost crazy with excitement and anxiety. The house was full again at last—"It's like the old days!" she said over and over. "The good days."—but she had no food to offer the guests of the house. "I can't even offer them water!" she said, tears of rage springing into her eyes. "I haven't got enough drinking cups!"

"Borrow them," said Bomi.

"No, no," Ista said, offended at the thought, but I said, "Why not?"—and Bomi darted off to extort drinking cups from neighbors. I went back to the reception hall and spoke to Ennulo Cam, the wife of Sulsem Cam who had come last night—a year ago!—and had returned now with his wife and son

to sit and talk with the Waylord and the others. I explained our need to her, and very soon a couple of boys from Cammand brought us a half hundred heavy glass goblets, telling Ista, as they had been bidden, “A gift from our house to the blessed House of the Fountain.” It was hard for Ista to take offense at that, though she scowled. From then on she kept Bomi and Sosta frantic, fetching water for every guest and taking back and washing out the goblets. She still wanted to offer food, of course, to everyone, but I did not see my way to begging on that scale. I said to her that the people came to talk not eat. She scowled again, bit her lip, and turned away. I realised then that I had given her an order, and she had taken it.

I went to her and put my arms round her. She hadn’t cuffed me for years, but she never had been one for hugs. “Bymother,” I said, “don’t fret! Be happy with the spirits and shadows of our house. Our guests want nothing more than the water of the Oracle Fountain.”

“Ah, Memer! I don’t know what to think!” she said, getting loose from me, with a hasty pat on my shoulder.

None of us knew what to think, that day.

When Orrec came back at last, he was the comet not the tail: a stream of people followed him from the Council Square. He was the hero of the city. He stopped at the Oracle Fountain and looked up at the ceaseless silver jet of water with the same laughing amazement I had seen on so many faces. Gry came to meet him there. Shetar was shut away in the Master’s rooms (where, Gry had told me, she was sulking and tearing strips out of the poor mangy old carpet). Orrec and Gry held each other for a long time before they went up the steps and into the reception hall.

Everybody crowded after them. Once he had greeted the Waylord, Orrec had to tell the whole story that I’ve just written of the morning’s events at the Council House. Some of it we already knew from people who had been back and forth from Galvamand and the square, but the pursuit of Iddor and the priests to the prison chamber and the finding of Ioratth and Tirio was news to us—as was the disappearance of Iddor.

If Orrec couldn’t tell us what he had said to the crowd, there were plenty of people who could: “He said, ‘Let them beg for alliance and we’ll grant them alliance!’ ” one old man shouted out. “By the Harrow of Sampa, let ’em beg! Let ’em crawl! And we’ll give or not give in our own good time!”

That was the mood of the city, that day: fiercely joyous, belligerent, barely restrained from vengeance.

Ioratth had ordered his soldiers to keep off the streets and stay within the barracks area south and east of the Council House, which they surrounded with a cordon of guards. Wanting access to the Council stables where their horses and some of their men were, the soldiers tried to cordon off a passage between the barracks and the stables, but the crowd in the square got ugly; stones were thrown; and the Gand ordered his men to stay where they were, whether in the barracks or the stableyards.

The Alds were taking care to offer no provocation and show no fear. Their position could too easily become, perhaps already was, a state of siege. Once the habit of fear was broken, the citizens would realise that the conquerors who had mastered them for so long were dependent on them for supplies—and were, however formidable and well armed, vastly outnumbered. If the restraint Ioratth imposed on his men was mistaken for weakness, for unwillingness to fight, there could yet be a massacre.

They talked about that in the reception hall. And they talked about Desac and his group, what their plan had been and how it had gone wrong. The man who had taken refuge with us, Cader Antro, was there, and his story was confirmed and enlarged by others. The arsonists were Ansul slaves, used as servants and sweepers by Ald courtiers; the idea of burning the great tent had come from one of them to begin with. They had secretly admitted to the tent other conspirators dressed as slaves, but armed, and with them had prepared so that fires would start up in several places at once, engulfing the tent in flame, while Desac's men, rushing into the square from two directions, would attack the soldiers on guard. All that was to take place at the sunset ceremony, so that Iddor and Ioratth and many officers and courtiers would be in the tent when the fire broke out.

But, because Iddor wanted to disturb Orrec's recitation, the priests began the ceremony earlier than planned, and so the time of the assault had to be changed, and word of the change didn't get to all the conspirators. The ceremony was already ending when the fires were set. Ioratth came late and was still there praying, but Iddor and the chief priests had just left the tent. The fire spread with terrible quickness, and all of Desac's people who were there attacked, but the soldiers were quick to rally and seemed fearless of the fire, the promised embrace of their

Burning God. In the fighting and the smoke and confusion, evidently only Iddor and the priests saw Ioratth stagger free of the flames. They seized and carried him to the Council House, while the soldiers drove the conspirators, those who tried to flee and those who tried to attack, into the furnace of the fire to be burned alive. Desac was one of them.

I could only think of that black foul dust of ash and cinder Orrec had told us of, kicked up by the feet of the crowds.

The people hearing the story were silent for a while before they began to talk again.

"So Iddor saw his chance," one man said, "with the old Gand as good as dead."

"Why did he put him in prison? Why not finish him off?"

"It's his father, after all."

"What's that to an Ald?"

I thought of Simme, how proud he was of his father, even of his father's horse.

"He was going to get his own back on the old man. Seventeen years he's been waiting!"

"And the old man's Ansul mistress."

"Torture them for the pleasure of it."

That brought a silence. People glanced uneasily at the Waylord.

"So where's he got to, that one, with his redhats?" a woman asked. People hated the Ald priests worse than they hated the soldiers. "I say they'll find him hiding. They'd never get through the streets alive, that lot."

She was right. We heard about it later that day, as news was constantly brought down the street to us by dusty, excited, exhausted people coming from the square. The citizens swarming through the Council House, retaking it for the city, throwing out all the goods and furniture of the Ald courtiers and officers who had used it for their quarters, came on Iddor and three priests hiding in a tiny attic room in the base of the dome. They were taken down and locked in the basement room, the torture chamber, where Ioratth and Tirio had been locked for a night. Where Sulter Galva had been locked for a year.

That news relieved our hearts. We had suffered much from Iddor's belief that he had been divinely sent to drive out demons and destroy evil,

and we all felt now that with him imprisoned, disgraced, the power of that belief was broken. We had to deal with an enemy still, but a human enemy, not a demented god.

And it was a relief also to know that the wild crowd going through the Council House hadn't torn the priests to pieces when they found them, but had locked them away to wait for some kind of justice—whether ours or the Alds'.

"We may treat Iddor better than his father would," said Sulsem Cam.

"I doubt he'd be gentle with him," Orrec said wryly.

"No gentler than your lady and her lion," said Per Actamo, who had rejoined Orrec here and helped him retell their exploits and adventures to newcomers wanting to hear it all over again all afternoon. "That was the beginning of the end of Iddor—when he flinched and drew back in front of all the crowd! Where is your lion, Lady Gry? She should be here to be praised."

"She's in a very bad temper," Gry said. "It's her fasting day, and I've had to keep her indoors. I'm afraid she's eaten part of the carpet."

"Give her a feast, not a fast!" said Per, and people laughed and called for the lion—"The only Ald on our side!" So Gry went and fetched Shetar, who was indeed in a sullen mood. She had not appreciated the swimming and boating of the night before, or the crowd scenes of the morning; she sensed the continuing tension in the city, and like all cats she detested uproar, excitement, change. She paced into the reception hall with a singsong snarling *warrawarrawarra* and a yellow glare. Everyone made her plenty of room. Gry led her up to the Waylord and had her do her stretching bow; and people laughed again and praised her. They asked for her to do her obeisance again, for Orrec, for Per, for a little boy of three who was there with his parents; and so Shetar got a good many treats, and began to cheer up.

It was evening. The big room was growing shadowy. Ista, along with Ialba, Tirio's companion who had brought us such important word at daybreak, came with lighted lamps. Ista had told me that that was always the signal for guests to leave, in the old days. And as if the ways and customs of our people had been given back to us today, all the visitors rose, one after another, and took their leave of the Waylord. They spoke to Orrec and Gry, and to me, and as they passed through the door they spoke

to the souls and shadows of the house. As they passed the fountain leaping up into the evening air they blessed the Lord of the Springs and Waters, and as they crossed the Sill Stone they bent down to touch it.

Chapter 14

LYING IN bed that night, sleep seemed as far from me as the moon, and I relived all the long day. I saw again Gry and her lion stand facing the priests and soldiers and the gold-cloaked man. I saw the leap of the fountain into the sunlight. I saw the Waylord stride out and down the steps beside me, saw him hold up a book before Iddor and us all, and heard that strange piercing voice, *Let them set free* . . . The cry echoed in my mind with the other words I myself had cried out or that had been said through me, *Broken mend broken,* and for a moment I thought I understood.

Yet I was mystified again, remembering that when I went to the front of the house with Orrec and the others, the Waylord had gone back to the secret room, seeming in despair, taking refuge. He could not have gone clear back into the cave of the oracle—there had been not time enough for that. He must have gone straight to the shadow end, taken that book from the shelves there, and come back all the way through the rooms and corridors and courts of the great house, to stride forward to face Iddor—not lame, not a broken man, but healed and whole. For that brief time. For the time needed.

Had he questioned the oracle? Had he known what the book said? What book was it?

I had seen it only as a small book in his hand. I had not seen its pages. I had not, could not have read from it. Surely it had been the book that spoke, not I. I was no longer certain now even of the words—had they been *Let them set free,* or *Be set free,* or only *Set free?* I could hear the voice in my mind but not the words. That troubled me. I struggled to hear them but they slipped away from me as if through clear water. I saw the fountain, the morning sunlight over the roofs of Galvamand brightening the high blossom of the water. . . .

And then it was morning indeed, early daylight dim on the walls of my little room.

And it was the holiday of Ennu, who makes the way easy for the traveller, speeds the work, mends quarrels, and guides us into death. People say she goes before the dying spirit as a black cat, stopping and looking back if the shadow hesitates, sitting patiently, waiting for it to follow her. Few of our gods are given any figure or image, only Lero in stones, and Iene in the oak and willow; but Ennu is often carved as a little cat, smiling, with opal eyes. I had such a figure that had been my mother's; it sat in the niche beside my bed, and I kissed it every morning and night. Ennu's house-shrine in Galvamand is in the old inner courtyard, an incurved shell of stone on a pedestal, with the tracks of a cat carved across the floor of it, very faint, nearly worn away by the fingers that have touched them in blessing over the centuries. I got up and dressed, and took a bowl out to the Oracle Fountain for water, and a handful of meal from the kitchen bin, and went to that shrine to make her offering. The Waylord met me there, and we spoke the praise of Ennu together.

Ista had breakfast ready for us, and then it was as the day before: the Waylord took his place in the front gallery of the house, and people came to talk to him and to one another all day long. The community of Ansul was knitting itself together, remaking itself, here.

The Waylord wanted me there with him. He said to me that the people wanted me there. And it was true, though few of them spoke to me except in greeting, a deeply respectful greeting that made me feel as if I were pretending to be somebody important. Sometimes a child was sent forward to give me flowers, dropping them on my lap or at my feet and then running away. After a while I was so flower-bedecked I felt like a roadside shrine.

I tried to understand what I was to them. They saw in me the mystery of what had happened yesterday—the fountain, the voice of the oracle. I was that mystery. The Waylord was their familiar friend and leader, a link to the old days. I was a new thing among them. He was Galva. I was the daughter of Galva, and through me the gods had spoken.

But they were quite content for me not to speak. I was to smile and say nothing. Enough mystery is enough.

They wanted to talk with the Waylord and with one another, to argue, to debate, to break out of seventeen years' silence, full of words and passion and argument. And they did that.

Some who came said they ought to be at the Council House, holding their meeting there, and as the idea excited them they were all ready to go off to the House that moment and reclaim it as the seat of our government. Selsem Cam and Per Actamo talked easily and quietly of the need to gather strength before they moved, of the need to plan and act upon plan: how could the Council meet if they had not held elections? Ansul had always been wary, they said, of men who claimed power as their right.

"In Ansul we don't take power, we lend it," said Selsem Cam.

"And charge interest on the loan," the Waylord added drily.

What the older people said carried weight with younger people, who had little or no memory of how Ansul had ruled itself and were uncertain how to begin to restore a government they could not remember. They listened to Per because he was Orrec's companion, Adira's Marra, the second hero of the city. Also I saw that when any man of the Four Houses spoke, people listened with respect, a respect based on nothing but habit, tradition, the known name; but useful now, because it gave some structure and measure to what might otherwise have been a competition in opinion-shouting. Sulter Galva, the most respected of all, in fact said very little, letting the others talk out their passions and their theories, listening intently, the silence at the center.

Often he looked up at me, or turned to see where I was sitting. He wanted me near him. We joined our silences.

As the day went on, more of the people who came to Galvamand were armed: troops of men, some with nothing but sticks and cudgels but others with long knives, lances with new-forged heads, Ald swords taken from soldiers in the street battles two nights ago. During a long argument, I went out to breathe fresh air and look at the fountain. I went round to visit Gudit, and found him at the little stable forge hammering out a spearhead, while a young man stood waiting with a long shaft for the lance.

The talk in the high room at the front of the house when I returned was less of meeting and voting and the rule of law than of assault, attack, plans to slaughter the Alds, though they didn't say so openly. They spoke only of

massing strength, of gathering the forces of the city together, of stockpiling weapons, of issuing an ultimatum.

I've thought often since of what I heard then and the language they used. I wonder if men find it easier than women do to consider people not as bodies, as lives, but as numbers, figures, toys of the mind to be pushed about a battleground of the mind. This disembodiment gives pleasure, exciting them and freeing them to act for the sake of acting, for the sake of manipulating the figures, the game pieces. Love of country, or honor, or freedom, then, may be names they give that pleasure to justify it to the gods and to the people who suffer and kill and die in the game. So those words—love, honor, freedom—are degraded from their true sense. Then people may come to hold them in contempt as meaningless, and poets must struggle to give them back their truth.

Late in the afternoon one of the leaders of these troops, a young man, hawk-faced and handsome, Retter Gelb of Gelbmand, urged his plan for the expulsion of the Alds from the city. Meeting some opposition among others there, he turned to the Waylord. "Galva! Did you not hold the book of the oracle in your hand, did we not hear its voice, *Set free?* How can we set our people free so long as the Alds' very presence here enslaves us? Can the meaning of the words be clearer?"

"It might," said the Waylord.

"If it's not clear, then consult the oracle again, Reader! Ask it if this isn't the moment to seize our liberty!"

"You may read for yourself," the Waylord said mildly, and taking a book from his pocket, he held it out to Retter Gelb. The gesture was not threatening, but the young man started back and stood staring at the book.

He was young enough that, like many people of Ansul under the Alds, he had perhaps never touched a book, never seen a book except torn to fragments, thrown into a canal. Or it may have been fear of the uncanny, of the oracle, that came over him. He said at last, hoarsely, "I can't read it." And then, ashamed and trying to regain his challenging tone, he said, with a quick glance at me, "You Galvas are the Readers."

"Reading was a gift we all shared once," the Waylord said, his voice no longer mild. "Time, maybe, that we all relearn it. In any case, until we understand the answer we got, there's no use asking a new question."

"What good is an answer we don't understand?"

“Isn’t the water of the fountain clear enough for you?”

I had never seen him so angry, a cold, knife-edge anger. The young man drew back again; after a pause he bowed his head a little and said, “Waylord, I beg your pardon.”

“Retter Gelb, I beg your patience,” he responded, still very coldly. “Let the fountain run water a while before it runs blood.”

He set the book down on the table and stood up. It was a small book bound in dun-colored cloth. I didn’t know if it was the book that had given us the oracle or some other.

Ista and Sosta were coming in with lamps.

“A good evening to you all, and a peaceful night,” the Waylord said, and taking up the book again, limped away from the crowd of people, back towards the shadowy corridors.

People left the house, then, bidding me a subdued good night. But many of them stayed to stand about on the maze in the courtyard, talking. There was a sense of unrest, unease, all through the city, a stir in the warm, windy, darkening air.

Gry came out of the house with Shetar on the leash and said to me, “Let’s walk over to Council Hill and see what’s doing,” and I gladly joined her. Orrec, she said, was in the house, writing; he had mostly kept to their apartments that day. He didn’t want to be part of the discussions and debates, she said, not being a citizen of Ansul, yet knowing whatever he said would be grasped at eagerly and given undue weight. “It worries him,” she said. “And this feeling that something is about to happen, some violence, something fatal that can never be undone . . .”

As we walked, people constantly greeted us, and saluted Gry and her lion, the first to face down Iddor and the redhats. She smiled and returned the greetings, but in a quick, shy way that did not lead to further talk. I said, “Does it scare you—being a hero?”

“Yes,” she said. She laughed a little and shot me a glance. “You too,” she said.

I nodded. I led us off Galva Street to a byway where we would meet nobody and could talk quietly as we walked.

“At least you’re used to all these people. Oh, Memer, if you knew where I came from! One street of Ansul has more houses in it than there are in all the Uplands. I used to go months, years, never seeing a new face. I used to

go all day never speaking a word. I didn't live with human beings. I lived with dogs, and horses, and wild creatures, and the hills. And Orrec . . . None of us knew how to live with other people. Except his mother. Melle. She came from the lowlands, from Derris Water. She was so lovely . . . I think his gift is from her. She used to tell us stories . . . But it's his father he's most like."

"How is that?" I asked.

She pondered and spoke. "Canoc was a beautiful, brave man. But he feared his gift, and so he hid his heart. Sometimes I see Orrec do that. Even now. It's hard to take responsibility."

"It's hard to have it taken from you, too," I said, thinking of the Waylord's life all the years I had known him.

We came back to the street at Goldsmiths' Bridge and went on up to the Council Square. There were a lot of people there, drifting and swirling about, mostly men, and many of them carrying weapons. Someone was haranguing the crowd from the terrace of the Council House, not too successfully, for people kept coming to listen and drifting away again. Over on the east side of the square was a solid line of both men and women, some afoot and some sitting down, keeping their place side by side and very much on the alert. I spoke to one of the women, a neighbor of ours, Marid; she told us they were there "to keep the kids from getting into trouble." Beyond them, down the hill, torches gave enough light that we could just make out the cordon of Ald soldiers guarding the barracks. These citizens had made themselves a barrier between the crowd and the soldiers, preventing random insults and forays against the Alds by young men looking for a fight or by idle stone-throwers. Anybody trying to provoke the soldiers into violence would have to break through that line of fellow citizens. It continued on across the square, in front of the stables, where I had sat and talked with Simme.

"You are a remarkable people," Gry said to me as we went back across the square. "I think you have peace in your bones."

"I hope so," I said. We were in the center of the square, where the great tent had been. The wreckage was gone now; there was no trace of it except the blackening of the pavement stones, a slight crunch of ash and cinders under the feet. We were walking where Desac had died, burnt alive in the fire he had set. I shuddered all over, and Shetar, at the same moment, set

up a long, strange wail, stretching her head up. I remembered how she had taken against Desac, glared at him. I saw him alive, straight-backed and soldierly, arrogant, passionate, talking with the Waylord— "We'll meet again, free men in a free city!" he had said. His shadow was all round us.

Returning, we crossed the bridge and paused at the railing from which we had seen a man thrown to his death. We looked down at the dark canal that reflected a glimmer or two of light from the houses on the bridge. Shetar growled a little, informing us that she did not want to go back down there and go swimming again. A band of boys ran past us, shouting a chant I had heard several times in the street that day, "Alds out! Alds out! Alds out!"

"Let's go down to the Lero Stone," I said, and we did; neither of us wanted to go inside on this strange night, with the city all awake and restless about us, and it was good to walk, too, after sitting still listening to people talk all day. We cut down by the Slant Bridge on Gelb Street to West Street and to the Stone. A good many people were there, quietly waiting and doing as I came to do: to touch the Stone and say the blessing of Lero, who holds the balance.

We started back up West Street. I said, not knowing that I was going to say it, "Did you and Orrec never have children, Gry?"

"Yes. We had a daughter," she answered in her quiet voice. "She died of the fever in Mesun. She lived a half year."

I could say nothing.

"She'd be seventeen now. How old are you, Memer?"

"Seventeen," I said, finding it very hard to say.

"I thought so," Gry said. She smiled at me. I saw her smile in the faint lamplight of the High Bridge. "Her name was Melle," she said.

I said the name and felt the touch of the little shadow.

Gry reached out her free hand to me, and we walked hand in hand.

"This is Ennu's day," I said, as we came to the turning of Galva Street. "Tomorrow will be a day of Lero. The balance will turn."

IN THE MORNING it seemed that the balance might have turned already: we heard early that there was a great crowd gathering in the Council Square,

not yet offering violence but noisy and determined, demanding that the Alds leave the city this same day. The Waylord conferred briefly with Orrec, and they came into the gallery together. Orrec looked tense and strained. He spoke to Gry for a moment, and she went to shut Shetar into the Master's room, while Gudit brought out both horses. Orrec mounted Branty. Gry mounted Star, and I ran with her, following Orrec through the crowds in Galva Street. They willingly parted for us, calling out Orrec's name.

He rode to the line of citizens still holding firm in the square in front of the line of soldiers. There he asked both the citizens and the soldiers if he might speak with the Gand Ioratth. They let him through at once. He dismounted and ran down the steps towards the Ald barracks.

I held Branty's bridle now, there in the crowd, like a real groom. He didn't need much holding. He stood solidly, alert but not troubled by the hubbub all round, and I tried to imitate him. Star shook her head often, whuffing and shuffling when people pressed up too close, and I tried not to imitate her. I was glad, though, that the horses kept a little space around us, for the presence of so many people was overwhelming. I could not think clearly, and emotions ran through me—elation, dread, excitement—they ran through us all, like the wind through leaves on a tree before a storm. I held Branty's bridle and watched Gry's face, which was still and calm.

There was a deep roaring in the crowd nearer the steps of the Council House; everybody turned that way, but I could see nothing over the heads and shoulders. Gry touched my arm and indicated that I should mount Branty. "I can't!" I said, but I couldn't hear myself, and she was making a hand stirrup for me, and a man near us said, "Up you go, girl!"—and I was abruptly sitting in the saddle on Branty's back, bewildered. Gry swung up onto Star, right beside me. "Look!" she said, and I looked.

People stood on the speakers' terrace: a woman in a dun-and-white striped gown, and Orrec in his black coat and kilt. They looked very small and bright to me, like images. The crowd was shouting and chanting. Some people were calling out, "Tirio! Tirio!" A man near us shouted ragefully, "Ald's whore! Gand's whore!" and immediately people turned on him, shouting at him with equal rage, while others tried to hush and separate them. I could not reach the stirrups with my feet and felt most insecure

perched way up there on the saddle, but Branty stood like a rock, and I was at least safe from the pushing and trampling of the crowd. Gradually the noise died away; Orrec had raised his right hand. “Let the maker speak,” people cried, and silence spread out slowly across the crowd, as the water of the fountain had spread out across the wide basin. When he spoke at last his voice rang out, distant but clear and resonant.

“This is Lero’s day,” he said. And said nothing further for a long time, for the whole crowd took up the deep, slow chant of “Lero, Lero, Lero!”—and my breath caught and tears filled my eyes and I was chanting with them, “Lero, Lero, Lero . . .” At last he raised his hand again, and the chant died away down the streets leading to the square.

“I who am not of Ansul and not of Asudar—will you let me speak again to you?”

“Yes!” the crowd roared, and, “Speak! Let the maker speak!”

“Tirio Actamo, daughter of Ansul and wife of the Gand of the Alds, stands here with me. She and her husband ask me to say this to you: The soldiers of Asudar will not attack you, they will not interfere with you, they will not leave their barracks—such are the Gand Ioratth’s orders, and his soldiers will obey. But he cannot order the soldiers to leave Ansul without the consent of his king in Medron. So he waits to hear from Medron. And he, and Tirio Actamo, and I beg you to be patient, and to take your city back and claim your freedom in peace, not in blood. I who saw the ruler, betrayed and imprisoned, set free—I who with you saw water leap from the fountain that was dry two hundred years, and heard with you the voice that cried aloud from silence—I your guest—while we wait together for Lero to show us how the balance falls, and whether we are to destroy or to rebuild, to fall to war or walk in peace—while we wait, may I offer in return for your hospitality and the grace of the gods of Ansul a story, a story of war and peace, of slavery and freedom? Will you hear the *Chamhan*? Will you hear the tale of Hamneda when he was made a slave in Ambion?”

“Yes,” the crowd said, and now the sound was like a great, soft wind in grass. We could all feel the tension in us lessening, and we were grateful for it, grateful to the voice that freed us from dread and passion and unreason, if only for a little while, for the time it takes to tell a story.

Anywhere else in all the Western Shore, people would have known that story; even here, where the books had been destroyed, many in the crowd knew it, or at least knew the hero's name. But many had never read the story nor heard it told. And to hear it told aloud, among a great throng, openly, asserting our inheritance as our right and our heroes as our own—that was a great thing to us, a great gift Orrec gave us. He told it as if he himself had never known it before and discovered it as he spoke it, as if the betrayal of Hamneda by Eloc appalled him, as if he were chained and beaten with Hamneda, and wept with him at the torture and death of old Afer, and feared for the slaves who risked their lives to help him escape. He was no longer telling the *Chamhan* I had read, but his own tale in his own words, when he came to the confrontation in the palace of Ambion, when Hamneda released the tyrant Ura from his chains, bidding him be gone from Ambion, and said to the rebels of the city, "Freedom is a lion let loose, the sun rising: you cannot stop it here or there. Give liberty to have liberty! Set free to be free!"

Since then I have heard people maintain that that is what the voice of the oracle said on the steps of Galvamand: *Set free to be free*. Maybe it was so.

In any case, when they heard those words, the crowd in the Council Square made the sound a great crowd makes when it hears said what it wants to hear. When Orrec finished the tale they were not silent, but roared praise, and their mood was jubilant, as if they themselves had been freed from constraint or dread. They flooded up around Orrec on the terrace of the Council House, and Gry and I had no chance at all of getting to him.

We could, however, from our horseback height, see him and Tirio; and we saw the crowd begin to swirl around them and carry them slowly towards Galva Street. Gry hopped off Star and shortened my stirrups, then swung up again into her saddle. "Hold with your knees and never mind the reins," she called, and we set off, surrounded by our own swirl of praise and jokes and shouting, on my first horseback ride—out of the square, across the three bridges of Galva Street, to Galvamand.

The people parted and made way for us, so that we soon caught up to Orrec and Tirio. Dismounting at our stable gate, I ran back to the house in time to see Tirio's meeting with the Waylord in the gallery. He stood up, seeing her, and she ran forward with her hands held out, saying his name,

“Sulter!” They embraced and held each other, both in tears. They had been friends when they were young, maybe lovers, I don’t know; they had known each other in youth and wealth and happiness and then been separated for years of shame and pain. He was crippled. She had been beaten, her hair torn out. I remembered how he had said to me, long ago, tenderly, “There’s a good deal to weep about, Memer.” I cried then too, for them, for the grief of the world.

Orrec came beside me, as I stood there inside the doorway trying to hide my tears. His face still had the bewildered brightness of one who has been acclaimed, taken out of himself by the power of the crowd; but he put his arm round my shoulders and said softly, “Hello, horse thief.”

IT SEEMED AS IF Orrec and Lero had tipped the balance. That day and the days following, there was still tremendous unrest in the city, but it was less rageful, less threatening. There was a lot of angry talk, but fewer weapons were brandished. The Council House was opened for debate on the planning of an election.

People kept coming to Galvamand to talk in the gallery and to dance the maze—I saw it at last, I saw women dance the maze. After a day or two, Ista went out among them, scowling, with a dishcloth in her hand, and said, “You’ve got it all wrong. You turn here, when you sing ‘Eho!’ and then you turn there.” And she showed them how to dance the blessing properly. After that she went back to the kitchen.

She was working very hard, and so were Bomi and I and even Sosta. People kept bringing gifts to the house, gifts of food, knowing how strained our hospitality must be with the endless flow of guests. Ista had brought herself to accept them, not as gifts exactly, or honor, or tribute, but as what was due the Waylord and his house—as debts owing and repaid. So her mind worked, like many minds in Ansul. If we have peace in our bones, we have commerce in them too.

Ialba went back with Tirio to help her care for Ioratth, whose burns were severe and slow to heal. The next day Tirio sent three women from the barracks to help us keep the house. They were city women who had been taken and kept as slaves for the use of the soldiers, like Tirio. As she won

the Gand's favor, she had been able to bring them out of utter subjugation to a more decent servitude. One of them, who had been taken and used by the soldiers as a girl of ten or eleven, was crippled and a little mad, but if we set her at any task of cleaning where she could work alone, she worked hard and contentedly. The others had both been of respectable households, knew how to keep a house, and were of great assistance to us.

Ista was inclined at first to treat them coldly and tried to keep them from talking to Sosta and me—look at what they'd been, after all, no doubt it wasn't their fault, but they were no fit company for young girls of a good house, and so on. They and I paid no attention to that. One of them had a man friend she'd known as a slave; he moved right in and took a hand with the heavy work. Gudit got on pretty well with him, because he had been a cartwright, and could plan how to build a carriage out of the broken-down bits of carts and wagons Gudit had been hoarding for years.

So in a few days there was a great increase of people, of life, in the house, and I liked it. There were more voices and not so many shadows. There was a little more order, a little less dust. Many hands touched the god-niches now in passing worship, not just mine.

But these days I saw very little of the Waylord. Only in public, among others.

And I had not been to the secret room since the night the oracle spoke through me.

My life had been suddenly and wholly changed. I lived in the streets, not in books, and talked to many people all day long instead of to one man alone in the evening, and my heart was full of Orrec and Gry, so that sometimes I didn't even think of him. If I felt shame for that, I could excuse myself: I'd been important to him when I was the only person close to him, but now he no longer needed me. He was truly the Waylord again. He had the whole city to keep him company. He had no time for me.

And I had no time to go to the secret room, nights, as I had done for so many years. I was busy all day, tired at night. I kissed my little Ennu and fell asleep. The books in that room had kept me alive while my city was dead, but now it was coming back to life, and I had no need of them. No time, no need.

If I was afraid to go there, afraid of the room, of the books, I didn't let myself know it.

Chapter 15

IN THOSE days of early summer, it was as if we had forgotten the Alds, as if it didn't matter that they were still in the city. Armed citizen volunteers kept a close watch night and day on the barracks and the Council House stables, having formed a kind of militia and doing guard duty in relays, but in the Council House itself all the talk was about Ansul, not the Alds. There were daily meetings, large and tumultuous but led by people experienced in government, determined to restore Ansul's power and polity.

Per Actamo was at the center of these plans and meetings. He wasn't yet thirty, but he took to leadership as one born to it. His vigor and intelligence kept the older men from too quickly dropping back into "the way we always did it." He questioned the way we always did it, and asked if it mightn't be done better; and the constitution of the Council began to take shape freed of many useless traditional perquisites and rulings. I went often to hear him and the others speak in the open meetings, for they were exciting, full of hope. Per was at Galvamand daily to take counsel with the Waylord. Sulsem Cam came with his son Sulter Cam, usually to argue that everything should be done the way we always did it; but his wife Ennulo supported Per's proposals. So did the Waylord, though more indirectly, always striving to bring about a consensus and not to become locked in a mere debate of opinions.

They were already laying plans for the election day, when one sunny morning, in an hour, the news was all over the city: An Ald army is coming through the Isma Hills.

At first it was only a rumor that could be discounted, some shepherd's tale of seeing Ald soldiers, but then a boatman coming into the city down the Sundis confirmed it. A troop of soldiers had been seen marching on the

east side of the Isma Hills. They were probably already in the pass above the springs of the river.

Then there was panic. People ran past the house crying, “They’re coming! The Alds!” Crowds at the Council Square and in the streets swelled ceaselessly. Weapons were brought out again. Men rushed to the old city wall that runs along outside the East Canal and the gate where the road from the hills comes in. The wall had been half destroyed when the Alds took the city, but the citizens made barricades across the road and at the Isma Bridge.

The people who came to Galvamand that day were frightened, looking for guidance. Too many remembered the fall of the city seventeen years ago. Per and others who might have spoken to them were at the Council House. The Waylord kept calming them, and they listened to him; but soon he called me and talked to me in the corridor alone.

“Memer,” he said, “I need you. Orrec can’t get through the crowd; they’ll stop him and want him to tell them what to do. Can you get through the lines—to Tirio, to Ioratth—and find out what they know about this force of soldiers, and whether the Gand has changed his orders to his troops? And bring word back to me?”

“Yes. Have you any word for them?” I asked.

He looked at me then just as he used to look at me when I happened to get the words of some translation from the Aritan exactly right, not surprised, but deeply pleased, admiring. “You’ll know what to say,” he said.

I put on my boy’s tunic and tied back my hair. People knew me now, and I didn’t want to be recognised and stopped with questions. So I went as Mem the half-breed.

I got along Galva Street all right for a while, dodging and shoving, but after the Goldsmiths’ Bridge it was hopeless—the crowd was solid. I ran down the stairs we’d taken that evening, remembering the clatter of hoofs and the shouting and the smell of smoke. I ran along the canal to the Embankments, crossed there, and back down the east bank to where I could cut across to the exercise grounds and the hippodrome. They were empty, deserted, but I saw the line of Ald soldiers on guard, up on the long, low swell of Council Hill behind the stables. All I could do was climb the hill towards them, my heart beating harder and harder.

The soldiers stood and said nothing. They watched me. A couple of crossbows were aimed at me.

I got to within ten feet of them, stopped, and tried to catch my breath.

They looked more foreign to me, those men, than they had ever looked in all the years I'd seen Ald soldiers, my whole life. Their faces were sallow, their short, pale sheep hair curled out under their helmets, their eyes were pale. They stared at me without expression, without a word.

"Is there a boy named Simme in the Gand's stables?" I said. My voice came out very thin.

None of the six or seven men nearest me in the line moved or spoke for so long I thought they were not going to answer at all. Then the one right in front of me, who had no crossbow, but a sword in his belt and his hand on the hilt, said, "What if there is, youngster?"

"Simme knows me," I said.

He looked his question: *So?*

"I have a message from my master the Waylord to the Gand Ioratth. I can't get through the crowds. I can't get through the lines. It's urgent. Simme can vouch for me. Tell him it's Mem."

The soldiers looked at one another. They conferred a little. "Let the kid through," one said, but the others said no, and finally the swordsman nearest me said, "I'll take him in."

So I followed him on round the long back of the stables. Not every moment of this time is clear in my memory. I was so set on my goal that how I reached it seemed unimportant, details swallowed in the overriding urgency. I do remember some things clearly. I remember Simme coming into the small room where the swordsman had brought me to his officer. Simme saluted the officer and stood stiffly. "Do you know this boy?" the officer asked. Simme's eyes shifted to me. His head did not turn. His face changed entirely. It went soft, like Sosta's face when she looked at Orrec. His lips quivered. He said, "Yes sir."

"Well?"

"He's Mem. He's a groom."

"Whose groom?"

"He belongs to the maker and the lion woman. He came here with them. He lives at the Demon House."

"Very good," the officer said.

Simme stood still. His gaze came back to me, beseeching. He looked white and not so pimply. He looked tired, the way so many people of Ansul had looked, all my life. He looked hungry.

“You have a message from Caspro the maker for the Gand Ioratth,” the officer said to me.

I nodded. The name of Caspro the maker might be a safer password than that of Galva the Waylord.

“Say it to me.”

“I can’t. It’s for the Gand. Or for Tirio Actamo.”

“Obatth!” the officer said. After a moment I realised he was swearing. He looked me over again. “You’re an Ald,” he said.

I said nothing.

“What are they saying out there about an Ald force coming over the pass?”

“They say there is one.”

“How large a force?”

I shrugged.

“Obatth!” he said again. He was a short, worn-faced man, not young, and he too looked hungry. “Listen. I can’t get through to the barracks. The city people are holding the line between us. If you can get through, go ahead. Take a message for me too. Tell the Gand we’ve got ninety men here and all the horses. Plenty of fodder but short of food. Both of you go. — You heard the message, cadet?”

“Yes sir,” Simme said. I could see his chest fill with a deep breath. He saluted again, wheeled round, and strode out. I followed him, and the officer followed me.

The officer got us through the cordon, and then I got us through the line of citizens that faced them. I looked for a face I knew. Marid wasn’t there, but her sister Remi was, and I talked her easily enough into letting us pass. “A message from the Waylord to the Lady Tirio” was what did it.

Once out in the crowd of citizens in the open square, we were on our own. Fortunately Simme had no uniform except the blue knot on his shoulder. Once somebody said, “Are those kids Alds?”—seeing our hair—but we wriggled away into the crowd. We pushed and shoved and got cursed at clear round the east end of the stables, across the steps below the Council Square, and then we had to face the line of citizens again, near the

barracks. Again I found a face I knew, Chamer, one of Gudit's old friends, but how I talked us through I don't remember. Chamer spoke with the Ald guard facing him, quite a discussion, I do remember that. Then we were through both lines, and a guard was taking us across the parade ground to the barracks, shouting as he went for Simme's father.

I saw his father come running. Simme stopped and stood still and tried to salute him, but his father took him in his arms.

"Victory is well, Father," Simme said. He was crying. "I exercised her as much as I could."

"Good," his father said, still holding him. "Well done."

Other men and officers came pouring out of the barracks, and we gathered quite an escort walking past the long buildings and outbuildings. Whenever an officer stopped me, Simme and his father were there to affirm that I came from the Demon House, where the maker Orrec Caspro was, with a message from him. Then we went into the last building of the row, and the soldiers and officers dropped back. I saw Simme watching me as I was sent forward alone. I went past a door guard into a long room with long windows overlooking the curve of the East Canal. Tirio Actamo came forward to meet me.

She did not know me at first, and I had to say my name. She took my hands, and then embraced me; and I wasn't far from crying myself, from sheer relief. But there was my message to be given.

"The Waylord sent me. He needs to know what the Gand knows about the army coming from Asudar."

"Best you talk to Ioratth yourself, Memer," Tirio said. Her face was still swollen and discolored and her head bandaged, but the bandage became her, like a little hat; nothing could make her ugly. And she had a sweet, easy way about her, she comforted one's heart just by speaking. So I was less scared than I might have been when she took me across the room to the bed on which the Gand Ioratth lay.

He was propped up on a lot of embroidered pillows. A red cloth had been hung from the ceiling over the head of the bed, so that coming close was like entering a tent. The Gand's legs and feet were out from under the covers, covered with raw burns and black-scabbed ones, painful-looking. He glared at me like a leashed hawk.

"Who's this? Are you Ald or Ansul, boy?"

“I am Memer Galva,” I said. “I come to you from the Waylord, Sulter Galva.”

“Hah!” said the Gand. The glare became a gimlet. “I’ve seen you.”

“I came with Orrec Caspro when he recited to you.”

“You’re an Ald.”

“If I’d borne you a child, you might well take it for an Ald,” said Tirio, mild and ladylike.

He grimaced, absorbing this.

“What’s your message then, if the maker sent you?”

“The Waylord sent me,” I said.

“If Ansul has a leader, Ioratth, it is Galva the Waylord,” Tirio said. “Orrec Caspro is a guest of his house. It might be for the best if you and he were in communication.”

He grunted. “Why did he send you?” he demanded of me.

“To ask if you know why soldiers are coming from Asudar, and how many, and if you’ll change your orders to your troops when they come.”

“Is that all,” said the Gand. He looked at Tirio. “By God, this is a cool young sprout! One of your family, no doubt.”

“No, my lord. Memer is a daughter of the House of Galvamand.”

“Daughter!” the Gand said. The gimlet became a glare, and finally a blink. “So she is,” he said, almost resignedly. He moved in discomfort, and winced, and rubbed his head with its frizz of half-burnt hair. “And you think I should send her back to Galva with a list of my strategies and intentions, do you?”

“Memer,” Tirio asked, “is the city going to attack the barracks?”

“If they see an army coming down the East Road, I think they will,” I said. I had heard it urged again and again that morning—wipe out the soldiers here before these reinforcements arrive! Take the city back before they take it back!

“It’s not an army,” Ioratth said almost peevishly. “It’s only a messenger from the Gand of Gands. I sent him one two weeks ago.”

“I think the people of the city had better know that,” said Tirio, as mildly as ever, and I added, “Quickly!”

“What, you think my sheep are in revolt, do you?” His tone was caustic, sarcastic, a sarcasm directed at himself, perhaps.

“Yes, they are,” I said.

“Turned lions, have they?” he said in the same way, with another glance at me. He brooded a minute and then said, “If it’s that bad, I wish it was an army coming . . . For all I know it is. But I doubt it.”

“It would be well to know, my lord,” said Tirio.

“I have no way to know! We’re cooped up here. Surely the idiots fortifying the bridge down there could send some scouts up the road on horseback to spy out the size of this army?”

“No doubt they have,” I said, stung. “Maybe the soldiers killed them.”

“Well, we have to gamble till we know,” the Gand said. “And I’ll gamble that it’s no army, but a messenger with a troop of fifteen or twenty guards. Tell your Waylord that. Tell him to keep his lion-sheep from stampeding, if he can. Tell him to come here. To the square. With Caspro the maker, if he will. And I’ll get myself carried out there, and we can talk to the people. Calm them down. I heard what Caspro did the other day, cooling them off with his tale of Ura and Hamneda. By God he’s a clever man!”

I remembered how politely, even ornately, the Gand had spoken in public with Orrec and his officers. He was blunt and coarse now, no doubt because he was in pain, maybe also because he was talking to mere women. I tried to answer with stiff politeness, but fired up as I spoke. “The Waylord is not at your bidding, sir. He keeps to his house. If you want his help keeping the peace, come to him yourself.”

“Sulter Galva is as lame as you are, Ioratth,” said Tirio.

“Is he? Is he?”

“From torture,” I said, “when he was your son’s prisoner.”

The old man had been riled by my insolence, but at that he looked at me, a long look, and then away. After a while he said, “Very well then, I’ll go there. Order up a litter, a chair, something. Tell them we want an open parley, there, at what d’ye call it, Galvamand. No use throwing it all away . . . There’s been enough . . .” He did not finish his sentence. He lay back on his pillows, his face colorless and grim.

To arrange a parley was going to require some parleying, given the jittery confusion in the city. Ioratth was talking with several of his officers, giving them instructions, when we heard a trumpet call, sweet and high, far off, eastward, across the canal. It was promptly answered by a trumpet from the barracks here.

Within a few minutes the Ald force was reported in sight: a troop, as the Gand had hoped, of twenty or so, riding out of the hills with banners. We could hear the swelling noise of the crowds up on the Council Hill and in the streets leading to the East Canal. But as no army followed the mounted troop, the crowd noise at least grew no louder.

From the southeast window of the barracks house we could see the River Gate and the Isma Bridge. Tirio and I watched the troop arrive, halt outside the half-ruined wall, and talk with the citizens who had been guarding and fortifying the bridge. It took a while. At last, one Ald was allowed through the gate, on foot. Escorted by thirty or forty citizens, he crossed the bridge and came straight along the Eastway towards the cordon guarding the barracks. I saw that he carried a wand of white wood, which I knew from history books was the envoy's token.

"Here's your messenger, my lord," Tirio said to the Gand.

And before long the blue-cloaked officer came striding in, holding the wand, a troop of soldiers escorting him now, and saluted the Gand. "From the Gand of Gands and Son of the Sun, High Priest and King of Asudar, the Lord Acray, a message to the Gand of Ansul, the Lord Ioratth," he said, in the rolling, measured voice the Alds used for public speaking.

The old Gand got himself up higher on his pillows, gritting his teeth, made a kind of hunch for a bow, and said, "The messenger of the Son of the Sun, our most honored Lord Acray, is welcome. Dismissed, Polle," he said to the captain of the escort troop. He looked around at Tirio and me and Ialba who was there too, and said, "Out."

I felt like snarling like Shetar, but I followed Tirio meekly.

"He'll tell us what the man says as soon as he's gone," she said to me. "Now that we have a little time for it, are you hungry?"

I was both hungry and thirsty after my difficult journey through my city. She brought out what they had to offer: water, a small piece of black bread dried hard, a couple of dried black figs. "Siege rations," Ialba said with a smile. I ate them with the care and attention poverty's gift deserves, wasting not a crumb.

We heard the messenger depart, and soon enough Ioratth shouted, "Come!"

Are we dogs? I thought. But I came, with Tirio and Ialba.

Ioratth was sitting up straight, and his sallow, seamed face looked feverish. “By God, by God, Tirio, I think we’re off the hook,” he said. “God be praised! Listen. I want you both to go to the Palace or the Demon House, wherever there’s some kind of chief, somebody in charge of the mob, and tell them this: No army has come from Asudar. No army will come from Asudar, so long as the city keeps the peace. Tell them that the Gand of Gands offers to his subjects of Ansul full relief from tribute, to be replaced by taxation paid to the treasury in Medron as a protectorate state of Asudar. The Son of the Sun has honored me with the title of Prince-Legate to the Protectorate. In good time I’ll invite the chief men of Ansul to take counsel with me and hear our orders concerning the government of the city and the terms of trade with Asudar. A number of soldiers will remain here as my personal guard and to protect the city from its own unruly elements and from invasion from Sundraman or elsewhere. The greater part of our troops will return to Medron—when it’s certain that Ansul is in compliance with our orders. Now, is there anybody in this damned city capable of answering that, and acting on it?”

“I can take the message to the Waylord,” I said.

“Do it. Better than dragging me through the streets in a cart. Do it and come back with an acceptance. Come back with some men to talk to. Why do they send me children, girls, by God!”

“Because women and girls are citizens here, not dogs and slaves,” I said. “And if you knew how to write, you could send your so-called orders to the Waylord yourself and read his answers yourself!” I was shaking with fury.

The Gand gave one sharp glance at me and made a dismissive gesture. “Tirio, will you go?” he said.

“I’ll go with Memer,” she said. “I think that would be best.”

Indeed it was best. All I’d heard, all I could hear of the Gand’s message, was that we were ordered to pay taxes to Asudar, submit to be a protectorate not a free state, and do whatever the Alds told us to do.

I had to listen to what Tirio said to the Waylord, when we got back to Galvamand, and what he said to the people, and what people said about it, all day long, before I was able to understand that in fact Asudar was offering us our freedom—at a price—and that my people saw it clearly and truly as a victory.

Maybe they could see it so clearly because it did have a price on it, in money and trade agreements, matters my people understand.

Maybe I had so much trouble seeing it because nobody died bravely for it. No heroes fighting on Mount Sul. No more fiery speeches in the square. Only two middle-aged men, both crippled, sending messages across a city, cautious and wary, working out an agreement. And wrangles in the Council House. And a lot of talking and arguing and complaining in the marketplaces.

And the fountain running in the forecourt of the House of the Oracle.

And the temples of Ansul, the little houses of the gods and spirits, the shrines at every street corner and on every bridge, rebuilt, set up again, brought out of hiding, cleaned, carved anew, decorated with flowers. Lero's Stone was so covered with offerings sometimes you could not see it. On Iene's Feast, the solstice, men and boys brought garlands of oak and willow into the city in procession through the streets and hung them over the house doors, and women danced in the marketplaces and the square and sang Iene's songs. The older women taught the girls, like me, who did not know the dance steps or the songs.

All that summer people kept coming to the city from the rest of Ansul. Often they followed after the troops of Ald soldiers who were being withdrawn from the northern towns and gathered here before they were sent back east over the hills to Asudar. Citizens came to find out what was happening in the capital, and to take part in the elections; merchants and traders followed. In early autumn the Waylord of Tomer came to stay with the Waylord of Ansul. Ista lived in a passion of anxiety for two weeks making sure he was entertained in all ways as befitted the honor of the House of Galva.

By then the Council was meeting regularly, and Galvamand was no longer the center of political planning and decision making. It was just the Waylord's house, where a lot of talk took place about trade, about hay transport and cattle markets and what you could get in Medron or Dur for dried apricots or olives in brine. The first election held by the newly elected Council had been that of the Waylord of Ansul, voted unanimously to Sulter Galva; and with the post they allotted funds for entertainment and upkeep of the house. Not lavish funds, but wealth untold to us who ran

the household, and a heartening sign of the difference between paying tribute as a subject state of Asudar and paying taxes as a protectorate.

I had been utterly wrong about the Gand's message. I had misjudged it, and him. I had wanted to refuse patronisation, manipulation, compromise —politics. I had wanted to fling off every bond, to defy the tyrant. I had wanted to hate the Alds, drive them away, destroy them . . . my vow, my promise, made when I was eight years old, that I had sworn by all the gods and by my mother's soul.

I had broken that promise. I had to break it. *Broken mend broken*.

THE MESSENGER OF the High Gand returned to Medron a few days after I carried the message to Ioratth. They had an escort of over a hundred soldiers, under the command of Simme's father, and Simme rode beside him, going home. I had asked Ialba and Tirio to tell me what they could find out about them, and that is what they told me. I never saw Simme after he and I went through the lines together.

That troop escorting the messenger back to Medron also carried a prisoner in one of the provision carts: Iddor, son of Ioratth. He was in chains, we heard, in slave's clothing, with his hair and beard grown long, a sign of shame and disgrace to the Alds.

Tirio told us that Ioratth had not set eyes on his son since his betrayal, had not let anyone ask what should be done with him, would not let his name be spoken. He had, however, ordered that the priests be released from prison, even those who had been captured with his son. Presuming on this leniency, the priests had tried to intercede on Iddor's behalf, with a tale that they and Iddor had hidden Ioratth in the torture chamber only to save him from the vengeance of the rebel mob. Ioratth told them to be silent and be gone.

Since their Gand had been through the fire, both burnt and spared, his soldiers saw him as clearly favored by their Burning God, as holy as any priest. Realising their disadvantage, most of the priests chose to go back to Asudar with this first contingent of the army. So Ioratth's captains, left to their own judgment, decided the best thing to do with their embarrassing

prisoner, his son, was send him off too, and let the High Gand decide what to do with him.

I was disappointed by this ignominious, uncertain outcome. I wanted to know Iddor would be punished as he deserved. The Alds loathed treachery, I knew, and were shocked by the betrayal of a father by a son. Would he be tortured, as he had tortured Sulter Galva? Would he be buried alive, the way so many people in Ansul had been, taken down to the mudflats south of the city and trampled into the wet, salt mud until they suffocated?

Did I want him to be tortured and buried alive?

What did I want? Why was I so unhappy through all this bright summer, the first summer of our freedom? Why did I feel that nothing was settled, nothing won?

♦

ORREC WAS SPEAKING in the Harbor Market. It was a golden autumn afternoon, windless. Sul stood white across the dark-blue straits. Everybody in the city was there to hear the maker. He told some of the *Chamhan*, and they called for more and wouldn't let him go. I was too far away to hear well, and was restless. I left the crowd. I walked up West Street alone. Nobody was in the streets. Everybody was there behind me, together, in the marketplace, listening. I touched the Sill Stone and went into my house, clear through it, past the Waylord's rooms, to the back, to the dark corridors. I wrote the words in the air before the wall and the door opened and I went into the room where the books and the shadows are.

I had not been there for months. It was as it had always been: the clear, even light from the high skylights, the quiet air, the books in their patient, potent rows, and if I listened, the faint murmur of water in the cave down at the shadow end. No books lay out on the table. There was no sign of any presence there. But I knew the room was full of presences.

I'd intended to read in Orrec's book; but when I stood at the shelves my hand went to the book I had been working on last spring, the night before Gry and Orrec came, a text in Aritan, the *Elegies*. They are short poems of mourning and praise for people who died a thousand years ago. The names of the authors are mostly not given, and all we know of the people named in the poems is what the poet says.

One of them reads, “Sullas who kept the house well, so that the patterned pavements shone, now keeps the house of silence. I listen for her step.”

Another, the one I’d been trying to understand when I stopped reading, is about a horse trainer; the first line is, “Surely where he is, they are around him, the long-maned shadows.”

I sat down at the table, at my old place, with that book and the wordbook of Aritan, with its notes in the margins written by many hands over the centuries, and tried to make out what the next lines meant.

When I’d understood the poem as well as I could, and had it in my memory, the light from the skylights was fading. Lero’s Day, the equinox, was past, the days were getting short. I closed the book and sat on at the table, not lighting the lamp, just sitting there feeling for the first time in a long time a sense of peace, of being in the right place. I let that feeling come all through me and penetrate me and settle in me. As it did, I was able to think, slowly and clearly, not so much in words as in knowing what matters and seeing what has to be done, which is the way I think. I hadn’t been able to think that way for months.

That’s why when I got up to leave the room, I took with me a book from it, a thing I had never done before. I took *Rostan*, the one I called Shining Red when I was a little child building walls and bear’s dens with the books.

I had heard Orrec speak of it longingly, not long ago, as a lost work of the maker Regali. The Waylord had said nothing in reply.

He had never said anything to Orrec about the books in the secret room. So far as I knew, he and I alone knew of the room itself.

That the oracle spoke through books, people knew vaguely, and now they’d actually heard its voice; but they didn’t ask to know more about the mystery, they didn’t want to pry into it, they let it be. After all, for years, books themselves had been accursed and forbidden, dangerous things even to know about. And though we of Ansul live comfortably among the shadows of our dead, we’re not a people with much taste for the uncanny. Sulter Galva the Reader was held in some awe, as was I; but people much preferred to deal with Sulter Galva the Waylord. The oracle had done its work, we’d been set free, and now we could get back to business.

But my business was a little different. That's what I'd seen at last, sitting at the reading table, with a closed book in my hands.

Chapter 16

ORREC, GRY, and Shetar had returned from the Harbor Market late in the afternoon, Orrec to collapse and sleep for a while as he always did when he could after a public performance. He was reviving now, roaming about barefoot and disheveled, when I came to the Master's rooms. He said, "Hello, horse thief," and Gry said, "There you are! We were just talking about taking a walk in the old park before it gets too dark to see."

Shetar did not understand separate words, such as "walk," as many dogs can do; but she often was aware of intentions before people knew they were intending anything. She was already standing up, and now she paced over with her graceful slouch to the door and sat down to wait for us. The plumed tip of her tail twitched back and forth. I scratched her around the ears and she leaned her head into my hand and purred a little.

"I brought this for you, Orrec," I said, and held out the tall book with its gold-printed red cover. He came over, slouching a bit himself and yawning, to take it. When he saw it was a book his mouth snapped shut and his face went taut. When he saw what book it was, he stood motionless, and it was a long moment before he drew breath.

"Oh, Memer," he said. "What have you given me?"

I said, "What I have to give."

He looked up from the book then to my face. His eyes were luminous. It gave me great joy to give him joy.

Gry came to his side and looked at the book; he showed her what it was, handling it with a lover's care, reading the first line half aloud. "I knew," he said, "I knew they must be here—some of the books of the great library — But this—!" He looked at me again. "Was this— Are there books here in the house, Memer?"

I hesitated. Gry, as quickly aware of feeling and intention as Shetar, laid her hand on his arm and said, "Wait, Orrec."

I had to think, and quickly, what indeed my intention was, what right I had and what responsibility. Was this book mine to give? And if it was, what of the other books? And the other lovers of books?

What I saw was that I could not lie to Orrec. And that answered the question of my responsibility. As for the right, I had to claim it.

"Yes," I said. "There are books here. But I don't think I can take you to the place where they are. I'll ask the Waylord. But I think it's closed, except to us. To my people. I think our guardians keep it hidden. The spirits of the house, the ancestors. And the ones who were here before us. The ones who told us to stay here."

Orrec and Gry had no trouble understanding this. They too had gifts of their lineage. They knew the burdens and chances laid on us by the shadows in our blood and bone, and by the spirits of the place we live in.

"Orrec, let me tell him I gave you the book," I said. "I didn't ask him if I could." Orrec looked concerned, and I said, "It'll be all right. But I need to talk to him."

"Of course."

"He never spoke of the books to you, because it was dangerous to know," I said. I felt I must defend the Waylord's silence. "For so long, he had to hide them all. From everybody. The Alds could never find them, here. So they were safe, and people weren't in danger for having them. But people knew. They brought books here in secret, at night—hidden in packages of candles or old clothes—in firewood, in a haybale—they risked their lives bringing books here, where they knew we could keep them safe. Families who'd hidden their books, like the Cams and the Gelbs, and people we didn't know, just people who'd found a book or kept it or saved it from the Alds. They knew to bring it here to Galvamand. But now, now we don't have to hide any more—do we? . . . Can you—could you ever read to the people, Orrec? Instead of reciting? To let them know, to let them see that books aren't demons, that our history, our hearts, our freedom's written in them?"

He looked at me with a slow, joyful smile that became almost a laugh. "I think it's you that should read to them, Memer," he said.

"Warrawarrroo!" Shetar said, losing patience at last.

Gry and I left Orrec with his treasure. We let Shetar lead us out and guide us in the twilight up to Denios' Fountain. There she roamed about

through the fallen leaves and rustling shrubbery, hunting mice, while we talked, sitting on the old marble bench by the fountain. Lights were coming on down in the houses of the city. Far out in the straits, under the last dim purple of sunset, we saw the glimmer of the boats of night fishermen. Sul was a pure cone of darkness against the dying light. An owl swooped past near us, and I said, “The good omen to you.”

“And to you,” Gry said. “You know, in Trundlede they call owls bad luck? They’re a gloomy, downhearted lot there. Too much forest, too much rain.”

“You’ve travelled all over the world,” I said dreamily.

“Oh, no, not yet. We’ve never been to Sundraman. Or the capes of Manva or Melune. And among the City States we’ve seen only Sentas and Pagadi, and we came only through a corner of Vadalva . . . And even if you know a land well, there’s always a town or a hill you haven’t seen. I don’t think we’ll run out of world.”

“When do you think you’ll go on?”

“Well, until just now, I’d have guessed that Orrec might be thinking of moving on to Sundraman before the winter, or in the spring. He wants to see what kind of poetry they have there, before we go back to Mesun. But now . . . I doubt he’ll go till he knows every book you can show him.”

“Are you sorry?”

“Sorry? Why? You’ve given him a great happiness, and I love to see him happy. It doesn’t come easy to him. Orrec has a difficult heart . . . You know what he can do with a crowd of people, how easy it seems to come to him and how they love him—and doing it, he’s carried away by it—but afterward, he feels cast down and false. It isn’t me at all, he says, it’s the sacred wind blows through me, and it empties me and leaves me like dry grass . . . But if he can write, and read, and follow his own heart in silence, he’s a happy man.”

“That’s why I love him,” I said. “I’m like that.”

“I know,” she said, and put her arm around me.

“But you yourself might want to be going on, Gry. Not just sitting here all year with a lot of books and politics.”

She laughed. “I like it here. I like Ansul. But if we stay through the winter, and I think now we will, I might find somebody who needs a hand training horses.”

"*Surely where he is, they are around him, the long-maned shadows*," I said. I said the rest of the poem for her when she asked.

"Yes. That poet got it right," she said. "I like that."

"Gudit is hoping to get some horses for the Waylord to use."

"I might train a colt for him. It stands to reason . . . But, anyhow, we'll go on, eventually. And sooner or later we'll go back to Urdile, to take what Orrec's learned to the scholars in Mesun. He'll be busy copying that book, and anything you give him, from now on."

"I could help him copy."

"He'll wear you out if you offer."

"I like doing it. I learn the book while I copy it."

She was silent for a little while and then said, "If we did go back to Urdile, next spring or summer, whenever—would you think of coming with us?"

"Coming with you," I repeated.

Sometimes, back in early summer, I had made a daydream of the caravan wagon which stood now in our stables: a daydream of Star and Branty pulling it across some long gold plain where the poplars cast shadows, or over a road in the hills, and Orrec driving it, and Gry and Shetar walking with me along the road behind. It had been just a fancy to cheer me, to take my mind away from anxiety, in the time of the fire and the crowds and the fear.

Now she made it real. That road lay before me.

I said, "I would go with you anywhere, Gry."

She leaned her head against mine for a moment. "We might do that, then," she said.

I thought, trying to see what it is that matters and what I have to do. I said finally, "I would come back here."

She listened.

"I couldn't leave him and not come back."

She nodded.

"But more than that. I belong to Galvamand. I think I am the Reader. Not he. It's passed along." I was speaking out of my own thoughts and I realised she could hardly know what I meant. I tried to explain. "There is a voice here, and it must speak through one who can—who can ask, who can read. He taught me. He gave me that. He kept it for me and passed it to

me. It’s not his to carry, but mine. And I have to come back to it. To stay here.”

Again she nodded, gravely, consenting fully.

“But Orrec could teach me, too,” I said, and then, sure I had gone too far and asked too much, I shrank into myself.

“That would complete his happiness,” Gry answered. She said it serenely and as a matter of course. “To have the books he longed for, and you to read them with—oh, you may not have to worry about leaving Galvamand, Memer! The problem may be getting him to leave . . . But I think you’d like it, the way we travel, stopping to stay a while in a town or a village, and finding the makers and musicians there. And they’ll speak and sing for us, and Orrec for them. They’ll bring out the books they have to show him, and the little boys who can recite ‘Hamneda’s Vow,’ and the old women who know old songs and tales . . . And then we always go back to Mesun. It’s a fine city, all towers on hills. I know Orrec would like to take you there, because he’s said so to me. To meet the scholars he knows there, and read with them. You could take them the learning of Ansul, and bring their learning back with you to Galvamand . . . But the best part is, I’d have you with me all that time.”

I bent my head to kiss her hard, strong little hand, and she kissed my hair.

Shetar came bounding past us, a wild thing in the darkening night.

“It must be supper time,” Gry said and stood up. Shetar came to her at once, and we went down to the house. Orrec was of course lost in *Rostan*, and had to be dragged from it bodily, and we three were late to table, arriving about the time Ista finally took her place.

We ate in the dining room now, not in the pantry, for we were generally twelve or more at table, what with the increase to the household, and Sosta’s new husband, and guests. I haven’t told of Sosta’s wedding. We cleaned the great courtyard for it, taking out all the broken stone and rubbish that had been left there since the house was looted and burned, replanting the marble flower boxes and training the trumpet vines that wreathed the walls, sweeping the tessellated pavement of red and yellow stone. The celebration was on a hot afternoon of late summer, a day of Deori. All the friends of both households came. Ista set out a splendid feast, and people danced while the moon crossed the sky above the

courtyard. And Ista said, watching the dancers, “It’s like the good times, the old times! Almost.”

This night, we had no guests but Per Actamo, who was as often at our house as his own. He had been elected to the Council, and was valued for his connection with the Gand Ioratth, now the Prince-Legate, through his cousin Tirio Actamo. Tirio herself played a peculiarly difficult part—once slave-concubine to the tyrant, now wife of the legate—victim of the enemy yet his conqueror. There were people in Ansul who still called her whore and shameless, and more who adored her, calling her Lady Freedom. She bore it all with steady mildness, as if there were no such thing as a divided loyalty. Most people ended up believing her to be nothing more than an ill-used, well-bred, sweet-natured woman making the best of her strange fortune. She was that, but she was more. Per was a man of lively intelligence and ambition, and he took counsel with Tirio as often as he did with the Waylord.

He brought a message from her, which he told us after dinner, in the Waylord’s rooms. Thanks to a gift sent by the Waylord of Essangan we had wine after dinner these days, a few drops of the golden brandywine of those vineyards, like fire and honey. One after another we offered our glass to the god-niche and drank the blessing. Then we sat down.

“My cousin has persuaded the Prince-Legate of Asudar to request to visit the Waylord of Ansul, at last,” said Per. “So I am the bearer of that request, couched in the usual incivilities of the Alds. But I think it’s meant civilly.”

“I grant it civilly,” the Waylord said with a bit of a grin.

“Frankly, Sulter, can you stand the sight of him?”

“I hold nothing against Ioratth,” the Waylord said. “He’s a soldier, he followed his orders. A religious man, he obeyed his priests. Till they betrayed him. Who he is himself, I have no idea. I’ll be interested to learn. That your cousin holds him dear is strongly in his favor.”

“We can always talk poetry with him,” said Orrec. “He has an excellent ear.”

“But he can’t read,” I said.

The Waylord looked up at me. A girl among grown women and men, I still had the privilege of listening without being expected to talk, and

mostly silence was my preference. But I had realised recently that when I did speak, the Waylord listened attentively.

Per Actamo was also looking at me with his bright, dark eyes. Per was fond of me, teased me, pretended to be awed by my learning, often seemed to forget he was thirty and I seventeen and talked to me as to an equal, and sometimes flirted with me without knowing, I think, that he was doing it. He was kind and handsome and I'd always been a little in love with him. I'd often thought that I'd marry Per some day. I thought I could, if I wanted to. But I wasn't ready for all that yet. I didn't want to be a woman yet. I'd had great love given me as Galva's daughter and heir, but I'd never yet had what Gry and Orrec offered me—freedom, the freedom of a child, a younger sister. And I longed for it.

Per asked me now, "Do you want to teach the Gand how to read, Memer?"

His teasing and the Waylord's attention put me on my mettle. "Would an Ald let a woman teach him anything? But if the Gand's going to deal with people in Ansul, he'd better learn not to be afraid of books."

"Maybe this isn't the best house in which to prove that particular point," said Per. "There's at least one book here that would put the fear of the gods into anybody."

"They said the last priests went back with the troops that left today," said Gry. The connection of her thought was clear to us all.

"Ioratth kept his house priests," Per said. "Three or four of them. To say the prayers and lead the ceremonies. And drive out demons when necessary, I suppose. He doesn't find as many demons here as his son did, though."

"It takes one to find one," said Gry.

" 'The god in the heart sees the god in the stones,' " Orrec murmured, a line of Regali, though he said it in our own language.

The Waylord didn't hear him. He was still brooding, and now he asked me, as if he had been following the idea since Per had jokingly said it, "Would you teach the Gand Ioratth how to read, if he consented to learn, Memer?"

"I'd teach anybody who wanted to learn," I said. "As you taught me."

The talk passed on to other things. After arranging that the visit to Galvamand by the Prince-Legate and his consort would take place in four

days, Per took his leave. Orrec was yawning hugely, and he and Gry soon went off to sleep. I rose to see that the Waylord had what he needed before I too went to bed.

"Stay a minute, Memer," he said.

I sat down willingly. Since I'd been back to the secret room and renewed that bond with all my past years there, I felt that things were as they used to be between him and me. Our bond, too, that I'd thought was weakened, held as strong and as easy as ever. He was linked now to many people other than me, and I to some people other than him; we no longer needed each other so urgently for strength and solace; but what difference did that make? Hidden in solitude and poverty, or among people in a rich busy world, he and I were bound by all the shadows of our ancestry, and by the power we shared and the knowledge he'd given me, and by dear love and honor.

"Have you been to the room at all?" he asked me.

We were indeed bound very close.

"Today. For the first time."

"Good. Every night I think I'll go there and read a little, but I can't drag myself. Ah, it was easier in Ista's old days, I'll admit. I could spend all day talking grain prices and half the night reading Regali, then."

"I gave *Rostan* to Orrec," I said.

He looked up, not following at once, and I went on, "I took it out of the room. I thought it was time."

"Time," he repeated. He looked away, thinking, and at last said only, "Yes."

"Is it true, as I think, that only we can enter the room?"

"Yes," he said again, almost absently.

"Then shouldn't we bring the books out of hiding? The ordinary books. As we kept them in hiding. For the same reason. So that people would have them."

"And it's time," he said. "Yes. I suppose you're right. Though . . ." He brooded a little longer. "Come, Memer. Let's go there," he said, and pushed himself up from his chair. I took up the small lamp and followed him back through the ruined corridors to the wall that seems to be the back wall of the house, the wall that has no door in it. There he wrote in the air the letters that spell the word "open" in the language of our ancestors who

came from the Sunrise. The door opened, and we went through. I turned and closed it and it became the wall.

I lighted the big lamp on the reading table. The room bloomed with its soft light, and the gold on the spines of books glimmered a little here and there.

He touched the god-niche and murmured the blessing, and then stood looking about the room. He sat down at the table, rubbing a stiff knee. “What were you reading?” he asked.

“The *Elegies*.” I brought the book from the shelf and laid it before him.

“How far have you got?”

“ ‘The Horse Trainer.’ ”

He opened the book and found the poem. “Can you say it?”

I recited the ten lines of Aritan.

“And?”

I said my reading of it, as I had to Gry. He nodded. “Very satisfactory,” he said, with a suppressed smile.

I sat down at the table opposite him, and after a little silence he said, “You know, Memer, Orrec Caspro came just in time. He can teach you. You were about to discover that you can teach me.”

“Oh no! I mostly just guess at the *Elegies*. I still can’t read Regali.”

“But now you have a teacher who can.”

“Then—you’re not displeased—it was right to give him *Rostan*?”

“Yes,” he said, with a deep breath. “I think so. How can we know what’s right, when we can’t understand the powers we have? I am a blind man asked to read the message given him by a god.”

He turned over the pages of the book on the table and closed it softly. He looked down towards the end of the room where the light of the lamps died away. “I told Iddor I was the Reader. What is reading when you don’t know the language? You are the Reader, Memer. Of that at least I have no doubt. Do you doubt it?”

The question was abrupt. I answered it without hesitation: “No.”

“Good. Good. And that being so, this is your room, your domain. Blind as I was, I kept it in trust for you. And for all those who brought their treasure to us here, the books . . . What shall we do with them, Memer?”

“Make a library,” I said. “Like the old one here.”

He nodded. “It seems to be the will of the house itself. We merely obey it.”

That was how it seemed to me too. But I still had some questions.

“Waylord, that day . . . The day the fountain ran.”

“The fountain,” he said. “Yes.”

“The miracle,” I said.

With that same hint of a smile, he said, “No.”

I was perhaps surprised, perhaps not.

His smile grew broader and merrier. “The Lord of the Springs showed me the means, some while ago,” he said. “I’ll show you, when you like.”

I nodded. That was not where my mind was.

“Does it grieve you or shock you, Memer, that a miracle may be taken into our own hands, as it were?”

“No,” I said. “Not that one. But the other . . .”

He watched me and waited.

“You weren’t lame,” I said.

He looked down at his hands, his legs. His face was grave now. “So they tell me,” he said.

“You don’t remember?”

“I remember coming to this room in fear and anguish. As soon as I entered, it came to me that I should let the fountain run, and I hurried to do that, not reasoning why. As if obeying. And next, it came to me that I should take a book from the shelf. And I did that. And there was need for haste, so I . . . could it be that I ran? I don’t know. It must be that those who silenced me when they needed my silence, needed me then to waken your voice.”

I looked down the room, to the shadow end. So did he.

“You didn’t ask the . . . ?”

“There wasn’t time to consult the oracle. And it wouldn’t have answered me. It speaks to you, Memer, not me.”

I didn’t want to hear what he was telling me, even though I had said that I was the Reader. My heart protested in fear, in humiliation. “It doesn’t speak to me!” I said. “It uses me!”

He nodded briefly. “As I was used.”

“It wasn’t even my voice—was it? I don’t know! I don’t understand it. I’m ashamed, I’m afraid! I don’t ever want to go into that darkness again.”

He said nothing for a long time, and finally spoke gently. “They use us, yes, but they do not use us ill . . . If you must go into the dark, Memer, think, it’s only a mother, a grandmother, trying to tell us something we don’t yet understand. Speaking a language you don’t yet know well, but it can be learned. So I told myself, when I had to enter there.”

I thought about that for a while, and it began to give me comfort. It made the darkness of the cave less uncanny, to imagine that my mother’s spirit was there, with all the other mothers of my race, and they wouldn’t seek to frighten me.

But I had one more question.

“The book—the one you had in your hand—is it on the oracle shelves?”

His silence now was different; he was finding difficulty in answering. At last he said, “No. I took the first book I saw.”

He got up, limped to a bookcase nearby, the closest to the door, and took a little volume from a shelf at eye level. I recognised the dun-colored, unlettered binding. He brought it back and held it out to me in silence. I was afraid to take it but I took it, and after a minute I opened it.

I recognised it then. It was a primer, a reading book for children, *Tales of the Beasts*. I had read it when I was first learning to read, years ago, here, in the secret room.

I turned the pages, my fingers stiff and awkward. I saw the small woodcuts of rabbits and ravens and wild boars. I read the last line of a story, “So the Lion returned home to the desert and told the beasts of the desert that the Mouse was the bravest of all creatures.”

I looked up at the Waylord, and he looked back at me. His face and his slight gesture said: *I do not know.*

I looked at the little book that had set us free. I thought of Denios’ words, and said them aloud: “ ‘There is a god in every leaf; you hold what is sacred in your open hand.’ ”

After a while, I added, “And there are no demons.”

“No,” the Waylord said. “Only us. We do the demon work.” And again he looked down at his crippled hands.

We were silent. I heard the faint sound of the water running in the dark.

“Come,” he said, “it’s late, the dream senders are all around us. Let’s let them have their way.”

I held the small lamp in my left hand and with my right hand wrote the bright letters on the air. We went through the door, and along the dark corridors. Passing his room I bade him sleep well, and he stooped to kiss my forehead, and so we parted with the blessing for the night.

POWERS

PART ONE

Chapter 1

"DON'T TALK about it," Sallo tells me.

"But what if it's going to happen? Like when I saw the snow?"

"That's why not to talk about it."

My sister puts her arm around me and rocks us sideways, left and right, as we sit on the schoolroom bench. The warmth and the hug and the rocking ease my mind and I rock back against Sallo, bumping her a little. But I can't keep from remembering what I saw, the dreadful excitement of it, and pretty soon I burst out, "But I ought to tell them! It was an invasion! They could warn the soldiers to be ready!"

"And they'd say—when?"

That stumps me. "Well, just ready."

"But what if it doesn't happen for a long time? They'd be angry at you for giving a false alarm. And then if an army did invade the city, they'd want to know how you knew."

"I'd tell them I remembered it!"

"No," Sallo says. "Don't ever tell them about remembering the way you do. They'll say you have a power. And they don't like people to have powers."

"But I don't! Just sometimes I remember things that are going to happen!"

"I know. But Gavir, listen, truly, you mustn't talk about it to anybody. Not anybody but me."

When Sallo says my name in her soft voice, when she says, "Listen, truly," I do truly listen to her. Even though I argue.

"Not even Tib?"

"Not even Tib." Her round, brown face and dark eyes are quiet and serious.

"Why?"

“Because only you and I are Marsh people.”

“So was Gammy!”

“It was Gammy that told me what I’m telling you. That Marsh people have powers, and the city people are afraid of them. So we never talk about anything we can do that they can’t. It would be dangerous. Really dangerous. Promise, Gav.”

She puts up her hand, palm out. I fit my grubby paw against it to make the vow. “I promise,” I say as she says, “I hear.”

In her other hand she’s holding the little Ennu-Mé she wears on a cord around her neck.

She kisses the top of my head and then bumps me so hard I nearly fall off the end of the bench. But I won’t laugh; I’m so full of what I remembered, it was so awful and so frightening, I want to talk about it, to tell everybody, to say, “Look out, look out! Soldiers are coming, enemies, with a green flag, setting the city on fire!” I sit swinging my legs, sullen and mournful.

“Tell me about it again,” Sallo says. “Tell all the bits you left out.”

That’s what I need. And I tell her again my memory of the soldiers coming up the street.

Sometimes what I remember has a secret feeling about it, as if it belongs to me, like a gift that I can keep and take out and look at when I’m by myself, like the eagle feather Yaven-dí gave me. The first thing I ever remembered, the place with the reeds and the water, is like that. I’ve never told anybody about it, not even Sallo. There’s nothing to tell; just the silvery-blue water, and reeds in the wind, and sunlight, and a blue hill way off. Lately I have a new remembering: the man in the high room in shadows who turns around and says my name. I haven’t told anybody that. I don’t need to.

But there’s the other kind of remembering, or seeing, or whatever it is, like when I remembered seeing the Father come home from Pagadi, and his horse was lame; only he hadn’t come home yet and didn’t until next summer, and then he came just as I remembered, on the lame horse. And once I remembered all the streets of the city turning white, and the roofs turning white, and the air full of tiny white birds all whirling and flying downward. I wanted to tell everybody about that, it was so amazing, and I did. Most of them didn’t listen. I was only four or five then. But it snowed,

later that winter. Everybody ran outside to see the snowfall, a thing that happens in Etra maybe once in a hundred years, so that we children didn't even know what it was called. Gammy asked me, "Is this what you saw? Was it like this?" And I told her and all of them it was just what I'd seen, and she and Tib and Sallo believed me. That must have been when Gammy told Sallo what Sallo had just told me, not to talk about things I remembered that way. Gammy was old and sick then, and she died in the spring after the snowfall.

Since then I'd only had the secret rememberings, until this morning.

I was by myself early in the morning, sweeping the hall outside the nursery rooms, when I began remembering. At first I just remembered looking down a city street and seeing fire leap up from a house roof and hearing shouts. The shouts got louder, and I recognised Long Street, running north from the square behind the Forefathers' Shrine. At the far end of the street smoke was billowing out in big greasy clouds with red flames inside them. People were running past me, all over the square, women and men, most of them running towards the Senate Square, shouting and calling out, but city guards ran by in the other direction with their swords drawn. Then I could see soldiers at the far end of Long Street under a green banner; they had long lances, and the ones on horseback had swords. The guards met with them, and there was deep shouting, and ringing and clashing like a smithy, and the whole crowd of men, a great writhing knot of armor and helmets and bare arms and swords, came closer and closer. A horse broke from it, galloping up the street straight at me, riderless, lathered with white sweat streaked red, blood running from where its eye should be. The horse was screaming. I dodged back from it. And then I was in the hall with a broom in my hand, remembering it. I was still terrified. It was so clear I couldn't forget it at all. I kept seeing it again, and seeing more. I had to tell somebody.

So when Sallo and I went to get the schoolroom ready and were there alone, I told her. And now I told her all over again, and telling it made me remember it again, and I could see and tell it better. Sallo listened intently and shivered when I described the horse.

"What kind of helmets did they have?"

I looked at the memory of the men fighting in the street.

"Black, mostly. One of them had a black crest, like a horse's tail."

“Do you think they were from Osc?”

“They didn’t have those long wood shields like the Oscan captives in the parade. It was like all their armor was metal—bronze or iron—it made this huge clanging sound when they were fighting with the guards with swords. I think they came from Morva.”

“Who came from Morva, Gav?” said a pleasant voice behind us, and we both jumped like puppets on strings. It was Yaven. Intent on my story, neither of us had heard him, and we had no idea how long he’d been listening. We reverenced him quickly and Sallo said, “Gav was telling me one of his stories, Yaven-dí.”

“Sounds like a good one,” Yaven said. “Troops from Morva would march with a black-and-white banner, though.”

“Who has green?” I asked.

“Casicar.” He sat down on the front bench, stretching out his long legs. Yaven Altanter Arca was seventeen, the eldest son of the Father of our House. He was an officer in training of the Etran army, and away on duty much of the time now, but when he was home he came to the schoolroom for lessons just as he used to. We loved having him there because, being grown up, he made us all feel grown up, and because he was always good-natured, and because he knew how to get Everra, our teacher, to let us read stories and poems instead of doing grammar and logic exercises.

The girls were coming in now, and Torm ran in with Tib and Hoby from the ball court, sweating, and finally Everra entered, tall and grave in his grey robe. We all reverenced the teacher and sat down on the benches. There were eleven of us, four children of the Family and seven children of the House.

Yaven and Torm were the sons of the Arca Family, Astano was the daughter, and Sotur was their cousin.

Among the house slaves, Tib and Hoby were boys of twelve and thirteen, I was eleven, and Ris and my sister Sallo were thirteen. Oco and her little brother Miv were much younger, just learning their letters.

All the girls would be educated till they were grown and given. Tib and Hoby, having learned to read and write and recite bits of the epics, would be let out of school for good, come spring. They couldn’t wait to get out and learn to work. I was being educated to be a teacher, so my work would always be here, in the long schoolroom with its high windows. When

Yaven and Torm had children, I would teach those children and the children of their slaves.

Yaven invoked the spirits of his Ancestors to bless our work today, and Everra reproved Sallo and me for not setting out the schoolbooks, and we got to work. Almost immediately Everra had to call up Tib and Hoby for scuffling. They stuck out their hands palm up and he whacked each one once with his yardstick. There was little beating in Arcamand, and no tortures such as we heard of in other Houses. Sallo and I had never even been struck; the shame of being reproved was quite enough to make us behave. Hoby and Tib had no shame, and as far as I could see no fear of punishment either, and hands as hard as leather. They grimaced and grinned and all but sniggered when Everra struck them, and indeed his heart wasn't in it. Like them, he couldn't wait for them to be out of his schoolroom. He asked Astano to hear them recite their daily bit of history from the Acts of the City of Etra, while Oco helped her little brother write his alphabet, and the rest of us got on with reading the *Moralities* of Trudec.

Old-fashioned, the old ways—those were words we heard often in Arcamand, spoken with absolute approval. I don't think any of us had the faintest idea why we had to memorise tiresome old Trudec, or ever thought to ask. It was the tradition of the House of Arca to educate its people. Education meant learning to read the moralists and the epics and the poets Everra called the Classics, and studying the history of Etra and the City States, some geometry and principles of engineering, some mathematics, music, and drawing. That was the way it had always been. That was the way it was.

Hoby and Tib had never got beyond Nemec's *Fables*, and Torm and Ris depended a good deal on the rest of us to get them through Trudec; but Everra was an excellent teacher, and had swept Yaven and Sotur and Sallo and me right into the histories and the epics, which we all enjoyed, though none so keenly as Yaven and I. When we'd finally finished discussing the Importance of Self-Restraint as exemplified in the Forty-first Morality, I snapped Trudec shut and reached for the copy of the *Siege of Oshir* that I shared with Sallo. We had just started reading it last month. I knew every line I'd read by heart.

Our teacher saw me. His long, grey-black eyebrows went up. “Gavir,” he said, “will you now please hear Tib and Hoby recite, so that Astano-ío can join us in reading.”

I knew why Everra did it. It wasn’t meanness; it was Morality. He was training me to do what I didn’t want to do and not do what I did want to do, because that was a lesson I had to learn. The Forty-first.

I gave Sallo the book and went over to the side bench. Astano gave me the book of the Acts of the City and a sweet smile. She was fifteen, tall and thin, so light-skinned that her brothers called her the Ald, after the people in the eastern deserts who are said to have white skins and hair like sheep; but “ald” also means stupid. Astano wasn’t stupid, but she was shy, and had perhaps learned the Forty-first Morality almost too well. Silent and proper and modest and self-contained, a perfect Senator’s daughter: you had to know Astano very well to know how warm-hearted she was and what unexpected thoughts she could think.

It’s hard for a boy of eleven to play the teacher to older boys who are used to bossing him around and roughing him up and who normally call him Shrimp, Swamp Rat, or Beaky. And Hoby hated taking orders from me. Hoby had been born on the same day as Torm, the son of the Family. Everybody knew but nobody said he was Torm and Yaven’s half brother. His mother had been a slave, he was a slave; he received no special treatment. But he resented any slave who did. He’d always been jealous of my status in the classroom. He stared at me frowning as I stood before him and Tib, sitting side by side on the bench.

Astano had closed the book, so I asked, “Where were you?”

“Sitting here all along, Beaky,” Hoby said, and Tib sniggered.

What was hard to take was that Tib was my friend, but whenever he was with Hoby he was Hoby’s friend, not mine.

“Go on reciting from where you left off,” I said, speaking to Hoby, trying to sound cool and stern.

“I don’t remember where it was.”

“Then start over from where you started today.”

“I don’t remember where it was.”

I felt the blood rise in my face and sing in my ears. Unwisely, I asked, “What do you remember?”

“I don’t remember what I remember.”

“Then begin at the beginning of the book.”

“I don’t remember it,” Hoby said, carried away with the success of his ploy. That gave me the advantage.

“You don’t remember any of the book at all?” I said, raising my voice a little, and Everra immediately glanced our way. “All right,” I said. “Tib, say the first page for Hoby.”

Under our teacher’s eye he didn’t dare not to, and set off gabbling the Origin of the Acts, which they’d both known by heart for months. I stopped him at the end of the page and told Hoby to repeat it. That made Hoby really angry. I’d won. I knew I’d pay for it later. But he muttered the sentences through. I said, “Now go on where you left off with Astano-ío,” and he obeyed, droning out the Act of Conscription.

“Tib,” I said, “paraphrase.” That’s what Everra always had us do, to show we understood what we’d memorised.

“Tib,” Hoby said in a little squeaky murmur, “pawaphwase.”

Tib broke into giggles.

“Go on,” I ordered.

“Go on, pawaphwase,” Hoby whisper-squeaked, and Tib giggled helplessly.

Everra was talking about a passage in the epic, lecturing away, his eyes shining, the others all listening intently; but Yaven, sitting on the second bench, glanced over at us. He gazed at Hoby with a sharp frown. Hoby shrank into himself and looked at the floor. He kicked Tib’s ankle. Tib immediately stopped giggling. After some struggle and hesitation he said, “It uh, it uh says, it means that uh, if the City is threatened uh with uh an attack the uh the Senate will uh what is it?”

“Convene,” I said.

“Convene and debilitate—”

“Deliberate.”

“Deliberate the conscription of able-bodied freemen. Is deliberate like liberate, only the opposite?”

That was one reason I loved Tib: he heard words, he asked questions, he had a strange, quick mind; but nobody else valued it, so he didn’t either.

“No, it means talk something over.”

“If you pawaphwase it,” Hoby muttered.

We mumbled and stumbled through the rest of their recitation. I was putting away the Acts with great relief when Hoby leaned forward from his bench, staring at me, and said between his teeth, “Master’s pet.”

I was used to being called teacher’s pet. It was inevitable—it was true. But our teacher wasn’t a master, he was a slave, like us. This was different. Master’s pet meant toady, sneak, traitor. And Hoby said it with real hatred.

He was jealous of Yaven’s intervention on my behalf, and shamed by it. We all admired Yaven and longed for his approval. Hoby seemed so rough and indifferent, it was hard for me to understand that he might love Yaven as much as I did, with less ability to please him, and more reason to feel humiliated when Yaven sided with me against him. All I knew was that the name he’d called me was hateful and unfair, and I burst out aloud, “I’m not!”

“Not what, Gavir?” said Everra’s cold voice.

“Not what Hoby said—it doesn’t matter—I’m sorry, Teacher. I apologise for interrupting. I apologise to all.”

A cold nod. “Sit down and be silent, then,” Everra said. I went back to sit by my sister. For a while I couldn’t read the lines of the book Sallo held in front of both of us. My ears kept ringing and my eyes were blurred. It was horrible, what Hoby had called me. I’d never be a master’s pet. I wasn’t a sneak. I’d never be like Rif—a housemaid who’d spied on the other maids and tattled, thinking to gain favor. But the Mother of Arca told her, “I don’t like sneaks,” and had her sold at the Market. Rif was the only adult slave who had been sold from our House in all my life. There was trust on both sides. There had to be.

When the morning lesson was over, Everra gave punishment for disturbing the class: Tib and Hoby were to learn an extra page of the Acts; all three of us were to write out the Forty-first Lesson of Trudec’s *Moralities*; and I was to copy out thirty lines of Garro’s epic poem *The Siege and Fall of Sentas* into the fair-copy book and have them memorised by tomorrow.

I don’t know whether Everra realised that most of his punishments were rewards, to me. Probably he knew it. But at the time I saw our teacher as old and wise beyond mere human feeling; it didn’t occur to me that he thought about me at all or could care what I felt. And because he called copying poetry punishment, I tried to believe that it was. In fact, I was

clamping my tongue between my teeth most of the time I was writing out the lines. My writing was scrabbly and irregular. The fair-copy book would be used in future classes, just as we used the books that previous generations of students had copied out when they were children in this schoolroom. Astano had copied the last passage in this book. Under her small, elegant writing, almost as clear as the printed books from Mesun, my lines went scrawling and straggling pitifully along. Looking at how messy they were was my real punishment. As for memorising them, I'd already done that.

My memory is unusually exact and complete. When I was a child and adolescent, I could call up a page of a book, or a room I'd seen, or a face, if I'd looked at it with any attention at all, and look at it again as if it were in front of me. So it was, perhaps, that I confused my memories with what I called "remembering," which was not memory but something else.

Tib and Hoby ran outdoors, putting off their tasks till later; I stayed in the schoolroom and finished mine. Then I went to help Sallo with sweeping the halls and courtyards, which was our perpetual task. After we'd swept the silk-room courts we went for a piece of bread and cheese at the pantry handout, and I would have gone back to sweeping, but Torm had sent Tib to tell me to come and be soldiers.

Sweeping the courts and corridors of that enormous house was no small job; it was expected that they be clean always, and it took Sallo and me a good part of the day to keep them that way. I didn't like to leave Sallo with all the rest of it, when she'd already done a lot while I did my punishment, but I couldn't disobey Torm. "Oh, you go on," she said, lazily pushing her broom along in the shade of the arches of the central atrium, "it's all done but this." So I ran out happily to the sycamore park under the city walls a few streets south of Arcamand, where Torm was already drilling Tib and Hoby. I loved being soldiers.

Yaven was tall and lithe like his sister Astano and the Mother, but Torm took after the Father, compact and muscular. There was something a little amiss with Torm, something askew. He didn't limp, but he walked with a kind of awkward plunge. The two sides of his face didn't quite seem to fit together, so he looked lopsided. And he had unpredictable rages, sometimes real fits, screaming, hitting out wildly or tearing at his own clothes and body. Coming into adolescence now, he seemed to be growing

together. His furies had calmed down, and he was making an excellent athlete of himself. All his thoughts were about the army, being a soldier, going to fight with Etra's legions. The army wouldn't take him even as a cadet for two years yet, so he made Hoby and Tib and me into his army. He'd been drilling us for months.

We kept our wooden swords and shields in a secret cache under one of the big old sycamores in the park, along with the greaves and helmets of leather scraps Sallo and I had made under Torm's direction. His helmet had a plume of reddish horse-hairs which Sallo had picked up in the stables and sewn in, so it looked quite grand. We always drilled in a long grass-alley deep in the grove, right under the wall, a secluded place. I saw the three of them marching down the alley as I came running through the trees. I snatched up my cap and shield and sword and fell in with them, panting. We drilled for a while, practicing turning and halting at Torm's orders; then we had to stand at attention while our eagle-eyed commander strode up and down his regiment, berating a man here for having his helmet on crooked and a man there for not standing up straight, or changing his expression, or letting his eyes move. "A shoddy lot of troops," he growled. "Damned civilians. How can Etra ever defeat the Votusans with a rabble like this?" We stood expressionless staring straight ahead, resolving in our hearts to defeat the Votusans come what might.

"All right," Torm said at last. "Tib, you and Gav are the Votusans. Me and Hoby are Etra. You go man the earthworks, and we'll do a cavalry attack."

"They always get to be the Etrans," Tib said to me as we ran off to man the earthworks, an old, half-overgrown drainage ditch that led out from the wall nearby. "Why can't we be the Etrans sometimes?"

It was a ritual question; there was no answer. We scuttled into the ditch and prepared to meet the onslaught of the cavalry of Etra.

For some reason they took quite a while coming, and Tib and I had time to build up a good supply of missiles: small clods of hard dry dirt from the side of the ditch. When we finally heard the neighing and snorting of the horses, we stood up and hurled our missiles furiously. Most of them fell short or missed, but one clod happened to hit Hoby smack on the forehead. I don't know whether Tib or I threw it. It stopped him short for a moment, stunned him; his head bobbed strangely back and forth and he stood

staring. Torm was charging on, shouting, “At them, men! For the Ancestors! Etra! Etra!”—and came leaping down into the ditch. He remembered to whinny as he leaped. Tib and I fell back before the furious onslaught, naturally, which gave Torm time to look around for Hoby.

Hoby was coming at a dead run. His face was black with dirt and rage. He jumped into the ditch and ran straight at me with his wooden sword lifted up to slash down at me. Backed up against bushes in the ditch, I had nowhere to go; all I could do was raise my shield and strike out with my sword as best I could, parrying his blow.

The wooden blades slid against each other, and mine, turned aside by his much stronger blow, flicked up against his face. His came down hard on my hand and wrist. I dropped my sword and howled with pain. “Hey!” Torm shouted. “No hitting!” For he had given us very strict rules of how to use our weapons. We were to dance-fight with our swords: we could thrust and parry, but were never to strike home with them.

Torm came between us now, and I had his attention first because I was crying and holding out my hand, which hurt fiercely—then he turned to Hoby. Hoby stood holding his hands over his face, blood welling between his fingers.

“What’s wrong, let me look,” Torm said, and Hoby said, “I can’t see, I’m blind.”

There wasn’t any water nearer than the Arca Fountain. Our commander kept his head: he ordered Tib and me to hide the weapons in the usual place and follow at once, while he led Hoby home. We caught up to them at the fountain in the square in front of Arcamand. Torm was washing the dirt and blood off Hoby’s face. “It didn’t hit your eye,” he said, “I’m sure it didn’t. Not quite.” It was not possible to be sure. The rough point of my wooden sword, driven upward by Hoby’s, had made a ragged cut above or on the eye, and blood was still pouring out of it. Torm wadded up a strip torn from his tunic and had Hoby press it against the wound. “It’s all right,” he said to Hoby. “It’ll be all right. An honorable wound, soldier!” And Hoby, discovering that he could see from his left eye at least, now the blood and dirt was no longer blinding him, stopped crying.

I stood at attention nearby, frozen with dread. When I saw that Hoby could see, it was a huge relief. I said, “I’m sorry, Hoby.”

He looked round at me, glaring with the eye that wasn't hidden by the wad of cloth. "You little sneak," he said. "You threw that rock, then you went for my face!"

"It wasn't a rock! It was just dirt! And I didn't try to hit you, with the sword I mean—it just flew up—when you hit—"

"Did you throw a rock?" Torm demanded of me, and both Tib and I were denying it, saying we had just thrown clods, when suddenly Torm's face changed, and he too stood at attention.

His father, our Father, the Father of Arcamand, Altan Serpesco Arca, walking home from the Senate, had seen us by the fountain. He now stood a yard or two away, looking at the four of us. His bodyguard Metter stood behind him.

The Father was a broad-shouldered man with strong arms and hands. His features—round forehead and cheeks, snub nose, narrow eyes—were full of energy and assertive power. We reverenced him and stood still.

"What is this?" he said. "Is the boy hurt?"

"We were playing, Father," Torm said. "He got a cut."

"Is the eye hurt?"

"No, sir. I don't think so, sir."

"Send him to Remen at once. What is that?"

Tib and I had tossed our headgear into the weapon cache, but Torm's crested helmet was still on his head, and so was Hoby's less ornate one.

"Cap, sir."

"It's a helmet. Have you been playing at soldiers? With these boys?"

He looked us three over once more, a flick of the eye.

Torm stood mute.

"You," the Father said, to me—no doubt assessing me as the youngest, feeblest, and most overawed—"were you playing at soldiers?"

I looked in terror to Torm for guidance, but he stood mute and stiff-faced.

"Drilling, Altan-dí," I whispered.

"Fighting, it looks like. Show me that hand." He did not speak threateningly or angrily, but with perfect, cold authority.

I held out my hand, puffed up red and purple around the base of the thumb and the wrist by now.

"What weapons?"

Again I looked to Torm in an agony of appeal. Should I lie to the Father?

Torm stared straight ahead. I had to answer.

“Wooden, Altan-dí.”

“Wooden swords? What else?”

“Shields, Altan-dí.”

“He’s lying,” Torm said suddenly, “he doesn’t even drill with us, he’s just a kid. We were trying to climb some trees in the sycamore grove and Hoby fell and a branch gashed him.”

Altan Arca stood silent for a while, and I felt the strangest mixture of wild hope and utter dread thrill through me, running on the track of Torm’s lie.

The Father spoke slowly. “But you were drilling?”

“Sometimes,” Torm said and paused—“sometimes I drill them.”

“With weapons?”

He stood mute again. The silence stretched on to the limit of endurance.

“You,” the Father said to Tib and me. “Bring the weapons to the back courtyard. Torm, take this boy to Remen and get him looked after. Then come to the back courtyard.”

We all ducked in reverence and got away as fast as we could. Tib was crying and chattering with fear, but I was in a queer, sick state, like a fever, and nothing seemed very real; I felt calm enough but could not speak. We went to the cache and hauled out the wooden swords and shields, the helmets and greaves, and carried them round the back way to the rear courtyard of Arcamand. We made a little pile of them there and stood by them waiting.

The Father came out, having changed into house clothes. He strode over to us and I could feel Tib shrinking into himself with terror. I reverenced and stood still. I was not afraid of the Father, not as I was afraid of Hoby. I was in awe of him. I trusted him. He was completely powerful, and he was just. He would do what was right, and if we had to suffer, we had to suffer.

Torm came out, striding along like a short edition of his father. He halted by the sad little heap of wooden weapons and saluted him. He kept his chin up.

“You know that to give a slave any weapon is a crime, Torm.”

Torm mumbled, “Yes, sir.”

“You know there are no slaves in the army of Etra. Soldiers are free men. To treat a slave as a soldier is an offense, a disrespect to the army, to the Ancestors. You know that.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You are guilty of that crime, that offense, that disrespect.”

Torm stood still, though his face was quivering terribly.

“So. Shall the slaves be punished for it, or you?”

Torm’s eyes opened wide at that—a possibility that clearly had not occurred to him. He still said nothing. There was a long pause.

“Who commanded?” the Father said at last.

“Me, sir.”

“So?”

Another long pause.

“So I should be punished.”

Altan Arca nodded very briefly.

“And they?” he asked.

Torm struggled, and finally muttered, “They were doing what I told them to, sir.”

“Are they to be punished for following your orders?”

“No, sir.”

The brief nod again. He looked at Tib and me as if from a great distance. “Burn that trash,” he told us. “Consider this, you boys: obeying a criminal order is a crime. Only because your master takes the responsibility do you go free.— You’re the Marsh boy— Gav, is it?— And you?”

“Tib, sir, kitchen, sir,” Tib whispered.

“Burn that stuff and get back to work. Come,” he said to Torm, and the two of them marched off side by side under the long arcade. They looked like soldiers on parade.

We went to the kitchen for fire, brought back a burning stick from the hearth there, and laboriously got the wooden swords and shields to burn, but then we put the leather caps and greaves on the fire and they smothered it. We scraped up the half-burnt pieces of wood and stinking leather, getting a lot of small burns on our hands, and buried the mess in the kitchen midden. By then we were both sniveling. Being soldiers had been hard, frightening, glorious, we had been proud to be soldiers. I had loved my wooden sword. I used to go out alone to the cache to take it out

and sing to it, smooth its rough splintery blade with a stone, polish it with grease saved from my dinner. But it was all lies. We had never been soldiers, only slaves. Slaves and cowards. I had betrayed our commander. I was sick with defeat and shame.

We were late for afternoon lessons. We ran through the house to the schoolroom and rushed in panting. The teacher looked at us with disgust. “Go wash,” was all he said. We hadn’t looked at our filthy hands and clothes; now I saw Tib’s face all smeared with soot and snot and knew mine was like it. “Go with them and get them clean, Sallo,” Everra added. I think he sent her with us out of kindness, seeing we were both badly upset.

I had seen Torm in his usual place on the schoolroom bench, but Hoby had not been there. “What happened?” Sallo asked us as we went to wash, and at the same time I asked, “What did Torm say?”

“He said the Father ordered you to burn some toys, so you might be late to class.”

Torm had covered for us, made us an excuse. It was a great relief, and so undeserved, after my betrayal of him, that I could have cried in gratitude.

“But what toys? What were you doing?”

I shook my head.

Tib said, “Being soldiers for Torm-dí.”

“Shut up, Tib!” I said too late.

“Why should I?”

“It makes trouble.”

“It wasn’t our fault. The Father said so. He said it was Torm-dí’s fault.”

“It wasn’t. Just don’t talk about it! You’re betraying him!”

“Well, he lied,” Tib said. “He said we were climbing trees.”

“He was trying to keep us out of trouble!”

“Or himself,” Tib said.

We had got to the courtyard fountain by now, and Sallo more or less pushed our heads underwater and rubbed and scrubbed us clean. It took a while. The water stung and then felt cool on my various burns and my puffy, aching hand. Between scrubs and rinses Sallo got the story out of us. She didn’t say much, except, to Tib, “Gav is right. Don’t talk about it.”

Going back to the schoolroom, I asked, “Is Hoby going to be blind in that eye?”

“Torm-dí just said he was hurt,” Sallo said.

“Hoby’s really angry at me,” I said.

“So?” Sallo said, fierce. “You didn’t mean to hurt him, and he did mean to hurt you. If he tries it again he’ll get into some real trouble.” She spoke the truth. Gentle and easygoing as she was, she’d fire up and fight for me like a mother cat for her kittens—everybody knew that. And she’d never liked Hoby.

She put her arm around me for a moment before we got back to the schoolroom, leaning on me and bumping me, and I leaned on her and bumped her, and everything was all right again, almost.

Chapter 2

HOBY'S EYE wasn't hurt. The ugly wound had cut his eyebrow in half, but as Torm put it, he didn't have much beauty to be spoiled. When he came back to the schoolroom the next day he was joking and stoical about his bandaged head, and cheerful with everyone—except me. Whatever the real source of his rivalry and humiliation, whether or not he really thought I'd thrown a rock at his face, he'd chosen to see me as an enemy, and was set against me from then on.

In a big household like Arcamand, a slave who wants to get another slave in trouble has plenty of opportunities. Luckily Hoby slept in the barrack while I was still in the house. —But as I write this story now, for you, my dear wife, and anybody else who may want to read it, I find myself thinking the way I thought back then, twenty years ago, as a boy, as a slave. My memory brings me the past as if it were present, here, now, and I forget that there are things to explain, not only to you but maybe also to myself. Writing about our life in the House of Arcamand in the City State of Etra, I fall back into it and see it as I saw it then, from inside and from below, with nothing to compare it to, and as if it were the only way things could possibly be. Children see the world that way. So do most slaves. Freedom is largely a matter of seeing that there are alternatives.

Etra was all I knew then, and this is how it was. The City States are almost constantly at war, so soldiers are important there. Soldiers are men of the two upper classes, the wellborn, from whom the governing Senate is elected, and the freemen—farmers, merchants, contractors, architects, and such. Male freemen have the right to vote on some laws, but not to hold office. Among the freemen is a small number of freedmen. Below them are the slaves.

Physical work is done by women of all classes in the house and by slaves in the house and outdoors. Slaves are captured in battle or raids, or

bred at home, and are bought or given by families of the two upper classes. A slave has no legal rights, cannot marry, and can claim no parents and no children.

The people of the City States worship the ancestors of those now living. People without ancestors—freedmen and slaves—can only worship the forebears of the family that owns them or the Forefathers of the City, great spirits of the days long ago. And the slaves love some of the gods known elsewhere in the lands of the Western Shore: Ennu, and Raniu's Lord, and Luck.

It's plain that I was born a slave, because here I am talking mostly about them. If you read a history of Etra or any other of the City States, it'll be about kings, senators, generals, valiant soldiers, rich merchants—the acts of people of power, free to act—not about slaves. The quality and virtue of a slave is invisibility. The powerless need to be invisible even to themselves. That was something Sallo already knew, and I was learning it.

We slaves, we house people, ate at the pantry handout, where grain porridge or bread, cheese and olives, were always to be had, fruit fresh or dried, milk, and hot soup in the evening and on winter mornings. Our clothes and shoes were good, our bedding clean and warm. Arcamand was a wealthy and generous house. The Mother spoke with contempt of masters who sent their slaves into the streets barefoot, hungry, or scarred with beatings. In Arcamand, old slaves past useful work were kept on, fed and clothed, till they died; Gammy, whom Sallo and I loved, and who had been the Father's nursemaid, was treated with special kindness in her old age. We boasted to slaves from other houses that our soup was made with meat and our blankets were woollen. We looked down on the liveries some of them had to wear—showy and shoddy, we thought them. Not traditional, ancestral, solid, sound, like everything at our house.

Adult male slaves slept in a big separate building called the barrack off the back courtyard, women and children in a great dormitory near the kitchens. Babies both of the Family and of house people and their wet-nurses had a nursery closer to the Family's rooms. The gift-girls lived and entertained their visitors or lovers in the silk rooms, pleasant apartments off the west inner garden.

It was up to the women to decide when a boy ought to move to the men's barrack. They had sent Hoby across the court a few months ago to

get rid of him, he was such a bully with the younger children in the dormitory. The older boys in the barrack were hard on him at first, I think, but still he saw it as a promotion to manhood and sneered at us for sleeping “in the litter.”

Tib longed to be sent across the court too, but I was perfectly happy in the dormitory, where Sallo and I had our own little nook with a lock-box and a mattress all to ourselves. Gammy had mothered us, and when she died they let us look after each other. Since slaves have no parents or children, in a dormitory a woman may take on a child or children to mother; no child is left to sleep alone, and some have several women looking after them. The children call all the women “aunty.” Our aunties said I didn’t need a motherer, since I had such a good sister, and I agreed.

My sister no longer had to protect me from Hoby’s persecutions in the dormitory, but they grew worse elsewhere. My sweeping duties took me all over the great house, and Hoby kept an eye out for me in any court or corridor where nobody else was likely to be. When he found me alone, he’d grab me by the back of my neck, lift me up, and shake me the way a dog shakes a rat to break its neck, grinning all the time into my face; then he’d throw me down hard on the ground, kick me, and go off. It was horrible being held up like that, helpless. I kicked and struck at him wildly but my arms were so much shorter than his that I couldn’t reach him, and if my kicks landed he never seemed to feel them. I dared not cry out for help, since a quarrel among slaves that disturbed members of the Family would be severely punished. I suppose my helplessness fed his cruelty, for it grew. He never shook and kicked me in front of other people, but he lay in wait for me more and more often, and he tripped me, knocked my plate of food out of my hands, and so on, and worst of all, lied about me to everyone, accusing me of stealing and sneaking.

The women in the dormitory paid little attention to Hoby’s tales, but the older boys in the barrack listened to him and came to treat me as a worthless little spy, a master’s pet. I didn’t see much of those boys, whose work took them out of my way. But I saw Torm daily at lessons. Ever since the battle in the ditch, Torm had dropped Tib and me entirely and made Hoby his only companion. Hoby had taken to calling me “the dung,” and Torm began to do so too.

Everra could not reprove Torm directly. Torm was the son of the Father. Our schoolmaster was a slave; it was his role, not himself, that was respected. He could correct Torm's mistakes in reading or measurements or music, but not his conduct; he could say, "You need to do that exercise over," but he couldn't say, "Stop doing that!" But Torm's fits of mindless rage when he was younger had given Everra an excuse and device which he still used to control him. When Torm began to shout and strike out, Everra used to lug him bodily out of the schoolroom and shut him up in a storage room down the hall, with the threat that if he came out, the Mother and Father would be told of his misbehavior. Torm would get over his fit there in solitude, and wait to be released. It may have been a relief to him, in fact, to be shut away; for even in the midst of a yelling, foaming rage, when he had grown too big and strong for Everra to manhandle, if the teacher said, "To the hall room, Torm-dí," he'd go running there and let the door be shut on him. He hadn't had a fit of that kind for nearly a year now. But once or twice, when he was unruly and restless, disturbing everybody else, Everra had said quietly to him, "To the hall room, please," and he had gone, obedient as ever.

One spring day in the classroom, Hoby was bent on persecuting me; he shook the bench when I was writing, he spilled the ink and accused me of trying to spoil his copybook, he pinched me savagely when I had to pass him. The teacher caught him doing that, and said, "Keep your hands off Gavir, Hoby. Hold them out!"

Hoby stood up and stuck out his hands palm up for the punishment, with his sheepish, stoical grin.

But Torm said, "He did nothing to be punished for."

Everra stood silent, taken aback. Finally he said, "He was tormenting Gavir, Torm-dí."

"That boy is dung. He should be punished, not Hoby. He spilled the ink."

"That was an accident, Torm-dí. I do not punish accidents."

"It was not. Hoby did nothing to be punished for. Punish the dung boy."

Though Torm was not going into the shaking frenzy of his old rages, he had the look of them in his face, a grimace, a blind stare. Our teacher stood silent. I saw him glance over at Yaven, who was on the other side of the room bent over the drawing table, absorbed in measuring an

architectural plan. I too was hoping the older brother would notice what was going on; but he didn't, and Astano was not in class that day.

At last Everra said, "To the hall room, please, Torm-dí."

Torm took a step or two in automatic obedience. Then he stopped.

He turned to face the teacher. "I, I, I order you to punish the dung boy," he said, thickly, barely able to make the words, his face quivering and shaking as it had that day when his father reprimanded him.

Everra's face went grey. He stood still, looking thin and old. Again he looked over towards Yaven.

"This is my classroom, Torm-dí," he said at last, with dignity, but almost inaudibly.

"And you are a slave and I give you an order!" Torm cried, his voice, which had not broken, going up shrill.

Now Yaven heard and looked round, straightening up.

"Torm?" he said.

"I've had enough of this filth, this disobedience!" Torm cried in that thick, shrill voice. He sounded like a crazy old woman. Maybe that was what made four-year-old Miv laugh. His little giggle rang out. Torm turned on the child and struck him a smashing blow to the head that threw him right off the bench against the wall.

Then Yaven was there, and with a grave and hasty apology to the teacher, took his brother by the arm and led him out of the room. Torm did not resist and did not say anything. He still glared blindly, but his face had gone loose and confused.

Hoby stood staring after him with the same dull, stricken look. Never had I seen so clearly that it was almost the same face.

Sallo was cradling little Miv, who had not made a sound. He seemed dazed for a while, then he wriggled about and turned his face against Sallo's arm. If he cried it was in silence.

The teacher knelt by them and tried to make sure the child had suffered no injury except the bruise that would be swelling up soon across half his face. He told Sallo and Miv's sister Oco to take him out to the atrium fountain and bathe his face. Then he turned to Ris and Sotur, Tib and Hoby and me, the only pupils left. "We will read Trudec," he said, his voice still hoarse and faint. "The Sixtieth Morality. On Patience."

He had Sotur read first. She stumbled bravely through it.

Soturovaso was the Father's niece. Her father had been killed at the siege of Morva soon after her mother died giving birth to her, so she was an orphan within the Family, the last and least among them. She had much the same quiet modesty as her older cousin Astano, whom she trusted and imitated, but the temper underneath it was quite different. She was no rebel, but she was not resigned. She was a solitary soul.

She was extremely upset now by Torm's defiance and discourtesy towards our teacher, whom she loved. Because she was the only one of the Family in the room, she felt responsible for that injury and for the apologies that should follow. There was nothing she, a child of twelve, could do, except obey promptly and show the teacher the utmost politeness, which she did. But she read very badly. The book was shaking in her hands. Everra soon thanked her and told me to go on with the passage.

As I began to read, I heard Hoby, on the bench behind me, move restlessly and hiss something. The teacher glanced at him and he was silent, but not quite silent. I was aware of him there behind me all the time as I read.

We got through the rest of the morning lessons somehow. Just as we were finishing, Sallo came back. She reported that she had left little Miv and his sister with the healer Remen, because Miv was dizzy and kept falling asleep. The Mother had been told, and would come see to the child. That was reassuring. Old Remen was only a slave mender, whose cure for everything was comfrey ointment and catnip tea, but the Mother was a renowned and experienced healer. "Arca looks after her own, even the littlest," Everra said with grave gratitude. "As you leave today, go by the Ancestors and give them worship. Ask them to bless all the children of the House, all its children, and its kind Mother."

We all obeyed him. Only Sotur could go in among the Ancestors, whose names and carven images crowded the walls of the great, dim, domed room. We house people knelt in the anteroom. Sallo held her little Ennu-Mé in her closed hand and murmured, "Ennu bless us and be blessed, please make Miv all right. I follow you, Ennu-Mé, dear guide." I made the reverence and knelt to my chosen Ancestor, Altan Bodo Arca, Father of the House a hundred years ago, whose portrait, carved in relief on stone and painted, could be seen from where we knelt. He had a wonderful face, like

a kindly hawk, and his eyes looked straight at me. I had decided as a very small child that he was my special protector, also that he knew what I was thinking. I didn't have to tell him that I was frightened of both Torm and Hoby right now. He knew. "Great Shadow, Forefather, Grandfather Altandí, let me get away from them," I asked him silently, "or make them not so angry. Thank you." After a while I added, "And please make me braver."

That was a good thought. I would need courage that day.

Sallo and I did the sweeping together and kept together while she did her spinning and I wrote out our geometry lesson. We didn't see Hoby around at the pantry or in the house. Evening came, and I thought I'd escaped and was wondering if I should go thank the Ancestor, when as I came back from the privies to the women's court I heard Hoby's voice behind me, "There he is!" I ran, but he and the big fellows with him caught me at once. I kicked and yelled and fought, but I was a rabbit among the hounds.

They took me to the well behind the barrack, pulled out the bucket, and took turns stuffing me into the well head down, holding my legs and pushing my body down till my head was under water and I was choking and breathing water, then pulling me up just far enough to recover.

Whenever they brought me back up into the air, strangling and writhing and vomiting, Hoby would lean over me and say in a queer flat voice, "That's for betraying your master, you little traitor. For sucking up to that foul old teacher, you swamp rat. See how you like getting wet, swamp rat." And they would cram me down into the well again, and no matter how I tried to brace my arms against the stones and hold my head away from the water they would push me down and down till the water flooded into my nostrils and I gasped and choked, drowning. I don't know how many times they did it till I lost consciousness, but I must have gone limp at last, and that scared them into thinking I was dead.

It's a capital offense for anyone but his master to kill a slave. They ran off and left me lying there by the well-head.

It was old Remen the slave mender who found me, coming to the back well, which he always said had purer water than the fountains. "Fell over him in the dark," he would say, telling the story afterwards. "Thought he was a dead cat! No, too big for a cat. Who's been drowning a dog in the

well? No, it’s not a drowned dog, it’s a drowned boy! By Luck! Who’s been drowning boys here?”

That was not a question I ever answered.

I suppose the boys thought their torture would not leave visible injuries, so my claims against them could be denied for lack of evidence; but in fact my arms and hands and head were lacerated and swollen with bruises I got in my struggles down in the narrow well, and even my ankles were black and blue from their merciless hands. Tough-bodied and hardy boys, they probably had no idea that they were doing me real harm, aside from terrifying me.

I came to in Remen’s little infirmary sometime that night; my chest hurt and my head ached, but I lay peacefully floating in a shallow pool of dim, yellowish light, feeling the silence moving out from me like the rings on quiet water. Gradually I became aware that my sister Sallo was asleep beside me, and that made the wonderful peacefulness sweeter still. I lay that way a long time, sometimes seeing only dim gold and shadows, sometimes remembering things. I remembered the reeds and the still, silky, blue water, and the blue hill away off in the distance. Then it was just the pool of light and the shadows and Sallo’s breathing again for a while. Then I remembered Hoby’s voice, “There he is!”—but the terror was like the pain and the headache, remote, untroubling. I turned my head a little and saw the tiny oil lamp that poured out that endless pool of warm, golden light from its grain of fire. And I remembered the man in the high, dark room. He was standing at a big table covered with books and papers, with a lamp and a writing desk on it, under a tall, narrow window; he turned to look at me as I came into the room. I saw him very clearly this time. His hair was turning grey and his face was a little like the Ancestor’s, both fierce and kind; but where the Ancestor was full of pride, he was full of sorrow. Yet seeing me he smiled, and spoke my name, Gavir.

“Gavir” again . . . and I was in the pool of dim light, looking up a long way, it seemed, at a woman’s face. She wore a night wrapper of white wool drawn partly over her head. Her face was smooth and grave. She looked like Astano but was not Astano. I thought I was remembering her. Slowly I realised that she was the Mother, Falimer Galleco Arca, at whose face I had never in my life gazed openly. Now I lay staring at her as if she were a carven image, an Ancestor, dreamily, without fear.

Beside me Sallo, sound asleep, stirred a little.

The Mother laid the back of her hand a moment on my forehead, and nodded a little. “All right?” she murmured. I was too weary and dreamy to speak but I must have nodded or smiled, because she smiled a little, touched my cheek, and went on.

There was a crib bed near my bed; she paused there a while. That would be little Miv, I thought, drifting back into the silence of the pool of light. I remembered when we went to bury Miv, down by the river, how the willows were like green rain in the grey rain of spring. I remembered Miv’s sister Oco standing by the small black grave with a flowering branch in her hand. I looked out across the river dappled with raindrops. I remembered when we all went down to the river to bury old Gammy; that was in winter, the willows were bare over the riverbanks, but I wasn’t so sad then because it was like a holiday, a festival, so many people came to bury Gammy, and there was to be a wake-feast after. And I briefly remembered some other time there, in spring again, I did not know who was being buried. Maybe it was myself, I thought. I saw the sorrow in the eyes of the man standing by the lamp at the table in the high, dark room.

And it was morning. Soft daylight instead of the dim golden pool. Sallo had gone. Miv was a little lump in the crib bed nearby. At the end of the room an old man lay in bed: Loter, who had been a cook till he got old, and got sick, and now was here to die. Remen was helping him sit up against a pillow. Loter groaned and moaned. I felt all right, and got up; then my head hurt and went dizzy, and a lot of parts of me hurt, so I sat down on the bed for a while.

“Up, are you, marsh rat?” old Remen said, coming over to me. He felt some of the lumps on my head. He had splinted a dislocated finger on my right hand, and explained the splint to me while he checked it. “You’ll do,” he said. “Tough, you kids are. Who did that to you, anyhow?”

I shrugged.

He glanced at me, nodded shortly, and did not ask again. He and I were slaves, we lived in a complicity of silences.

Remen wouldn’t let me leave the infirmary that morning, saying that the Mother was coming in to look at both me and Miv; so I sat on the bed and examined my lumps and cuts, which were extensive and interesting. When I got bored with them I recited from *The Siege and Fall of Sentas*,

chanting the lines. Along near noon, Miv finally woke up, and I could go over and talk to him. He was very groggy and didn't make much sense. He looked at me and asked me why I was two. "Two what?" I said, and he said, "Two Gavs."

"Seeing double," said old Remen, coming over. "A whack on the head'll do that. —Mistress!" and he went down in the reverence, and I did too, as the Mother came into the room.

She checked Miv very thoroughly. His head looked misshapen on the left from the swelling, and she looked into his ear and pressed his skull and cheekbones softly. Her face was concerned, but finally she said, "He is coming back," in her deep, soft voice, and smiled. She was holding him on her lap, and she spoke tenderly. "Aren't you, little Miv? You're coming back to us."

"It roars," he said plaintively, squinting and blinking. "Is Oco coming?"

Remen, shocked, tried to get him to address the Mother properly, but she waved him away. "He's only a baby," she said. "I'm glad you decided to come back, little one." She held him a while, her cheek against his hair; then she put him back in his crib and said, "Now go to sleep again, and when you wake up your sister will be here."

"All right," Miv said, and curled up and shut his eyes.

"What a lamb," the Mother said. She looked at me. "Ah, you're up, you're afoot, good for you," she said. She did look like her slender daughter Astano, but her face, like her body, was full and smooth and powerful. Astano's glance was shy; the Mother's gaze was steady. I looked down at once, of course.

"Who hurt you, lad?" she asked.

Not to answer old Remen was one thing. Not to answer the Mother was quite another.

After an awful pause I said the only thing that came to me: "I fell into the well, Mistress."

"Oh, come," she said, chiding but amused.

I stood mute.

"You're a very clumsy boy, Gavir," said the musical voice. "But a courageous one." She examined my lumps and bruises. "He looks all right to me, Remen. How's the hand?" She took my hand and looked at the splinted finger. "That'll take some weeks," she said. "You're the scholar,

eh? No writing for you for a while. But Everra will know how to keep you busy. Run along, then."

I bobbed the reverence to her and said, "Thank you," to old Remen, and got out. I ran to the pantry, and found Sallo there, and even while we were hugging and she was asking if I was really all right, I was telling her that the Mother knew my name, and knew who I was, and called me the scholar!

I didn't say that she had called me courageous. That was too immense a thing to talk about.

When I tried to eat, it didn't go down very well, and my head began thumping, so Sallo went with me to the dormitory and left me on our bed there. I spent that afternoon and most of the next day there, doing a lot of sleeping. Then I woke up starving hungry and was all right, except that I looked, as Sotur said, as if I'd been left out on a battlefield for the crows.

It was only two days since I'd been in the schoolroom, but they welcomed me back as if I'd been gone for months, and it felt that way to me too. The teacher took my injured hand in his long, strong-fingered hands and stroked it once. "When it heals, Gavir, I am going to teach you to write well and clearly," he said. "No more scrawling in the copybook. Right?" He was smiling, and for some reason what he said made me extremely happy. There was a care for me in it, a concern as gentle as his touch.

Hoby was watching. Torm was watching. I turned around and faced them. I reverenced Torm briefly; he turned away. I said, "Hello, Hoby." He had a sick look. I think seeing all my swellings and bruises in their green and purple glory scared him. But he knew I had not told on him. Everybody knew it. Just as everybody knew who had attacked me. There might be silence, but there were no secrets in our life.

But if I accused nobody, it was nobody's business, not even the masters'.

Torm had turned from me with a glowering look, but Yaven and Astano were kind and friendly. As for Sotur, she evidently felt she'd been thoughtless or heartless saying that I looked like I'd been left for the crows, for when she could speak to me without anybody else hearing she said, "Gavir, you are a hero." She spoke solemnly, and looked near tears.

I didn’t understand yet that the whole matter was more serious than my small part of it.

Sallo had said little Miv was to be kept in the infirmary till he was quite well, and knowing he was in the Mother’s care I thought no more about him or my fever dreams of the burial ground.

But in the dormitory that night, Ennumer, who mothered Miv and Oco, was in tears. All the women and girls gathered about her, Sallo with them. Tib came over to me and whispered what he’d heard: that Miv was bleeding from his ear, and they thought his head had been broken by Torm’s blow. Then I remembered the green willows by the river, and my heart went cold.

The next day Miv went into convulsions several times. We heard that the Mother came to the infirmary and stayed with him all that evening and night. I thought of how she had stood by my bed in the golden light. When we were sitting on our mattress in the evening, I said to Tib and Sallo, “The Mother is as kind as Ennu.”

Sallo nodded, hugging me, but Tib said, “She knows who hit him.”

“What difference does that make?”

Tib made a face.

I was angry at him. “She *is* our Mother,” I said. “She cares for us all. She’s kind. You don’t know anything about her.”

I felt I knew her, knew her as the heart knows what it loves. She had touched me with her gentle hand. She had said I was courageous.

Tib hunched up and shrugged and said nothing. He had been moody and gloomy since Hoby turned away from him. I was still his friend, but he’d always wanted Hoby’s friendship more than mine. He saw my cuts and bruises now with shame and discomfort, and was shy with me. It was Sallo who got him to come over to our nook and sit and talk with us before the women put the lights out.

“I’m glad she lets Oco stay with Miv,” Sallo said now. “Poor Oco, she’s so scared for him.”

“Ennumer would like to stay with him too,” Tib said.

“The Mother is a healer!” I said. “She’ll look after him. Ennumer couldn’t do anything. She’d just howl. Like now.”

Ennumer was in fact a foolish, noisy young woman, without half as much good sense as six-year-old Oco; but though her mothering had been

random, she was truly fond of Oco and Miv, her doll-baby as she called him. Her grief now was real, and loud. “Oh my poor little doll-baby!” she cried out. “I want to see him! I want to hold him!”

The headwoman came over to her and put her hands on Ennumer’s shoulders.

“Hush,” she said. “He is in the Mother’s arms.”

And tear-smeared, scared Ennumer hushed.

Iemmer had been headwoman of Arcamand for many years, and had great personal authority. She reported to the Mother and the Family, of course, but she never gained advantage for herself by making trouble for other house people, as she might have done. The Mother had proved that she didn’t like tattlers and toadies, by selling a tattler, and by choosing Iemmer as headwoman. Iemmer played fair. She had favorites—among us all, Sallo was her darling—but she didn’t favor anyone, or pick on anyone either.

To Ennumer, she was an awesome figure, far more immediately powerful than the Mother. Ennumer blubbered a little more, quietly, and let the women around her comfort her.

Ennumer had been sent to us from Herramand five years ago as a birthday gift to Sotur’s older brother Soter. She was then a pretty girl of fifteen, untrained and illiterate, for the Herra Family, like many others, thought it an unnecessary ostentation or even a risk to educate slaves, particularly girl slaves.

I knew Ennumer had had babies, two or three of them. Both Sotur’s older brothers often sent for her; she got pregnant; the baby was given to one of the wet-nurses, and presently traded to another House. Miv and Oco had been part of one of those bargains. Babies were almost always sold off or traded. Gammy used to tell us, “I bore six and mothered none. Didn’t look for any baby to mother, after I nursed Altan-dí. And then you two come along to plague me in my old age!”

Very rarely the mother, not the child, was sold off. That was Hoby’s case. He had been born on the same day as Torm, the son of the Family, and alleging this as a sign or omen, the Father had ordered that he be kept. His mother, a gift-girl, had been sold promptly to prevent the complications of kinship. A mother may believe the child she bore is hers,

but property can't own property; we belong to the Family, the Mother is our mother and the Father is our father. I understood all that.

I understood why Ennumer was crying, too. But to a boy my age women's griefs were too troubling to endure. I warded them off, walled them out. "Play Ambush?" I challenged Tib, and we got out the slates and chalk and marked the squares and played Ambush till lights-out.

Miv died as the sun rose that morning.

THE DEATH OF a slave child would not ordinarily cause any disturbance to a great House such as Arcamand. The slave women would weep, and the women of the Family would come with kind words and gifts of burial wrappings or money to buy them. Very early in the morning a little troop of slaves in funeral white would carry the litter down to the riverside graveyard, and pray at the grave to Ennu to lead the small soul home, and come back weeping, and get to work.

But this death was not quite ordinary. Everyone in Arcamand knew why Miv had died, and it was a troubling knowledge. This time, it was the slaves who spoke and the masters who kept silence.

Of course the slaves spoke only to other slaves.

But there was talk such as I had never heard: bitter anger, indignation, not from the women only but from men. Metter, the Father's bodyguard, respected by all for his strength and dignity, said in the barrack that the child's death was a shame to the Family, for which the Ancestors would demand atonement. The chief hostler, Sem, a clever, vigorous, fearless man, said out loud that Torm was a mad dog. Such sayings were whispered around the courts and corridors and the dormitory. And Remen's story, too: he told us that the Mother was holding Miv on her lap when he died, and she held him close for a long time and whispered to him, "Forgive me, little one, forgive."

He told this in the hope it might console Ennumer, for she was wild with grief, and it did comfort her to know the child had been in tender arms when he died, and that the Mother grieved that she hadn't been able to save him. But others heard it differently. "She might well ask forgiveness!" Iemmer said, and others agreed. The story of how Miv had

innocently laughed at Torm and how Torm had turned on the child and knocked him across the room—Oco had sobbed it out the day it happened, and Tib and Sallo had confirmed it, and as it was retold in the barrack and stables it lost nothing in the telling.

Hoby defended Torm, saying he'd only meant to slap the child for impertinence and didn't know his own strength. But Hoby was in ill favor. Nobody openly blamed him for my adventure at the well, since I hadn't accused him, but nobody admired him for it. And now his loyalty to Torm was held against him; it looked too much like siding with the masters against the slaves. I heard the stableboys call him "Twinny" behind his back. And Metter said to him, "A man who doesn't know his own strength ought to learn it fighting with men, not beating up babies."

This talk of blame and forgiveness was very distressing to me. It seemed to open cracks and faults in the world, to shake things loose. I went to the anteroom of the Ancestors and tried to pray to my guardian there, but his painted eyes looked through me, haughty and uninterested. Sotur was in the room, bowed down in silent worship; she had lighted incense at the altar of the Mothers, and the smoke drifted up into the high, shadowy dome.

That night after Miv died, I dreamed that I was sweeping one of the inner courts of the House and found leading from it a corridor I had never seen before, which led to rooms I did not know, where strangers turned to greet me as if they knew me. I was frightened of transgressing, but they smiled, and one of them held out a beautiful ripe peach to me. "Take it," she said, and called me by some name I could not remember when I woke. There was a shining like the trembling of sunlight all round her head. I slept and dreamed again, exploring the new rooms; I met no people now, but heard their voices in other rooms as I followed the high stone corridors. I came to a bright interior courtyard where a small fountain ran and a golden animal came to me trustingly and let me stroke its fur. When I woke I went on thinking about those rooms, that house. It was Arcamand and not Arcamand. "My house," I called it in my mind, because I had the freedom of it. The sunlight there was brighter. Whether it was a memory or a dream, I longed to dream it again.

But the green willows by the river, that had been a memory of what was to be.

We went down to the river that morning to bury Miv. Light was just coming into the world, a long time yet till sunrise. Sparse grey rain fell among the willows and drifted over the river. I remembered it and saw it at the same time.

A great crowd of people followed the mourners in white and the white-draped litter, as great a crowd as had come to Gammy's burial, almost all the slaves of Arcamand. Only those were missing whose absence from their duties, even so early in the morning, even for a burial, was not permitted. It was unusual to see so many men at a child's funeral. Ennumer wept and wailed aloud, and so did some of the other women, but the men were silent, and we children were silent.

They covered the little white bundle in the shallow grave with black earth. Miv's sister Oco came forward, tremulous and bewildered by grief, and laid on it a long spray of willow with delicate yellow catkin flowers. Iemmer took her hand and standing by the grave said the prayer to Ennu, the guide of the soul into death. To keep from crying I watched the river and the speckle of raindrops on its surface. We stood quite near it. Not far from us, where the bank was lower, I could see where old graves were being washed away by the current as it worked against the curve of the land. The whole outer edge of the great slave cemetery was flooded by the river running high in spring. Willows stood far out in the water, trailing their new green leaves. I thought of the water coming up here to the new grave, oozing into the dirt around Miv wrapped up in white cloth, rising and filling the grave, washing him away with the dirt and the leaves, the white cloth trailing in the current like smoke. Sallo took my hand and I pressed close to her side. Everything was washing and drifting and trailing away with the water, except my sister Sallo, except her. She was here. With me.

Chapter 3

WE WENT back to the House and to work. Everra did not hold class that day. Sallo and I did our sweeping. When we were sweeping the silk-room court she came and took hold of my hand suddenly. She was in tears. She said, “Oh, Gav, I keep thinking about Oco— If I lost my little brother I would die!” She hugged me fiercely, and then seeing I was crying too, she hugged me again, whispering, “You won’t ever go away, will you, Gav?”

I said, “Never. I promise.”

“I hear,” she said, trying to smile.

We both knew well enough what a slave’s promise is worth, but still it comforted us both.

When we finished sweeping, she went with Ris to the spinning room. I went to the pantry and found Tib, and we loitered out to the back court. Some of the big boys were there. I held back—I had never been sure which ones had helped Hoby dunk me—but they spoke to us mildly. They were playing toss, and one of them lobbed the ball to me. I only had one hand to catch with, but caught and passed it creditably, and then stood back and watched them throw and catch. One of them asked, “Where’s Hoby?” and another, Tan, said, “In trouble.”

“What for?”

“Sucking up,” Tan said, with a high loft of the ball to Tib. Tib fumbled it, another boy retrieved it and lobbed it back to Tan. He caught it, tossed it high and caught it, and turned to me. Tan was a stableboy, sixteen or seventeen years old, a short, thin fellow almost as dark-skinned as me. “You had the right idea, young Gav,” he said. “Stick to your own. Don’t go looking for gratitude up there.” He glanced at the windowed wall of Arcamand towering over the courtyard and back at me, and winked. He had a keen, bright face. I’d always liked Tan, and was flattered by his notice. As the older boys left, another of them slapped me lightly on the

shoulder, the kind of comradely notice that looks like nothing and means a lot. It brought a warmth to me I needed. I'd been down at the river in my head all morning, in the grey rain and the silence and the cold.

Tib ran off to the kitchen to his work. I had nothing to do. I went to the schoolroom because there was nowhere else to go. And because if any room in Arcamand was my room, it was that one. It was dear to me, with its four high north windows, its carved and grimy benches and desks and tables, the teacher's lectern, the bookshelves and stacked-up copybooks and slates, the big glass ink jug from which we filled our inkwells. Sallo and I were in charge of keeping it swept, dusted, and orderly, and though it looked quite neat and peaceful, I set to sorting and straightening out the books on the long shelves. All work was made awkward by the splint on my finger. Often I stopped and had a look into a book I hadn't read yet. Sitting on the floor by the shelves, I opened Saltoc Asper's *History of the City State of Trebs*, and got to reading about the long war between Hill Trebs and Carvol, which ended in the rebellion of the slaves in Hill Trebs and the utter destruction of the city. It was an exciting story, and troubling because it was about what I had glimpsed through those cracks in the walls. I was completely lost in it when Everra said, "Gavir?"

I leapt up and reverenced him and apologised. He smiled. "What's the book?"

I showed him.

"Read it if you like," he said, "though it might be better to read Asham first. Asper is political. Asham is above opinion." He went over to his lectern and looked through some papers, then sat on the long-legged stool and looked at me again. I was rearranging books.

"This is a heavy day," he said.

I nodded.

"I attended on Father Altan-dí this morning. I have some news that may lighten the day for you a little." He rubbed his hand over his mouth and jaw. "The Family will be going to the country early this year, at the beginning of May. I will go with them, and all my pupils, except for Hoby. He is henceforth excused from school and will serve under Haster. And Torm-dí has been granted leave to stay in the city and learn swordsmanship from a master teacher. He will join us in the country only at the end of summer."

This was a lot of news to absorb all at once, and at first I saw only the promise of a long country summer at the farm in the Ventine Hills. Then I saw the bonus—without Hoby! without Torm!— That was a moment of bliss. It was quite a while before I began to think about it in any other terms.

Tan and the other boys had already known it, this morning in the courtyard—news always got all over the House immediately: *Hoby's in trouble for sucking up* . . . Hoby hadn't been rewarded for his loyalty to Torm, but punished for it. "Serving under Haster" meant being sent to the civic workforce, to which every House contributed a quota of male slaves, to do the heaviest, hardest kind of labor and live in the city barrack, which was little better than a jail.

On the other hand, Torm hadn't been punished for killing little Miv, but rewarded for it. Studying the arts of war was the dream of his heart.

It burst out of me— "It's not fair!"

"Gavir," the teacher said.

"But it's not, Teacher-dí! Torm killed Miv!"

"He did not mean to, Gavir. Yet he is being made to do penance. He is not allowed to come with the Mother and the rest of us to Vente. He will live with his teacher and be subjected to a very severe discipline. Swordmaster Attec's pupils lead a hard, bare life of constant training, with no reward but their increase of skill. The Father spoke of it to Torm-dí while I was there. He said, 'You must learn self-restraint, my son, and with Attec you will learn it.' And Torm-dí bowed his head."

"But then Hoby—what did he do to be punished?"

The teacher was taken aback. "What did he do?" he repeated, looking at my scabs and swellings and splinted finger.

"But that—that didn't hurt the Family," I said, not knowing how to say what I felt. I meant that if Hoby was punished for what he'd done to me, it should be by his and my people, the slaves. That's why I hadn't said who hurt me. It was between us. It was beneath the Family's notice. But if Hoby was being punished for his attempt to defend Torm, clumsy as it had been, then it was so unfair that it must be a mistake—a misunderstanding.

"What happened to you was no accident," Everra said, "though in your loyalty to your schoolmate you say it was. But Hoby was insolent to me.

And through me the authority of the Father acts in this classroom. That cannot be tolerated, Gavir. Listen now; come sit here."

He went to sit at the reading table, and I went to sit by him, as I would when reading with him. "Loyalty is a great thing, but loyalty misplaced is troublesome and dangerous. I know you're troubled. Everyone in the House is troubled. The death of a child is a pitiable thing. You're hearing wild, angry talk, maybe, in the barrack and the dormitory. When you hear such talk, you must think what this household is: Is it a wilderness? Is it a battlefield? Is it an endless, hidden war of sullen rage against implacable force? Is that the truth of your life here? Or have you lived here as a member of a family blessed by its ancestors, where each person has his part to play, always striving to act with justice?"

He let me think that over a minute, and went on, "When in doubt, Gavir, look up. Not down. Look up for guidance. Strength comes from above. Your part is with the highest in this House. Born wild as you were, a slave as you are, as I am, without family, yet you've been taken into the heart of a great household and given all you need—shelter and food, great Ancestors and a kindly Father to guide you. And as well as all that, nourishment for your spirit—the learning I was given and can pass on to you. You have been given trust. The sacred gift. Our Family trusts us, Gavir. They entrust their sons and daughters to me! How can I earn that honor? By my loyal effort to deserve it. I wish when I die it might be said of me, 'He never betrayed those who trusted him.' "

His dry voice had become gentle, and he looked at me a while before he went on. "You know, Gavir, behind you, in the wilderness you came from, there's nothing for you. In the shifting sands beneath you, there's nothing for you to build on. But look up! Above you, in the power that sustains you and the wisdom offered to you—there you can set your heart, there you can put your trust. There you will find treasure. And justice. And a mother's mercy, which you never knew."

It was as if he talked of the house I had dreamed of, that sunlit house where I was safe and welcome and free. He restored it to me in waking life.

I couldn't say anything, of course. He saw what comfort he had given me, though, and he reached out to pat my shoulder, as the boy in the courtyard had, a light, brotherly touch.

He stood up to break the mood. “What shall we take to read in the summer?” he asked, and I said without thinking, “Not Trudec!”

♦

THE FAMILY HAD STAYED in the city for the past two summers, since the farm had not been considered safe from roving bands of Votusan soldiers out for plunder in the Ventine Hills; but our army had a camp now near Vente and had driven the Votusans back to their city gates.

I remembered the farm as a marvelous place. It was as if I felt the warmth of summer whenever I thought about it. Even the preparations for going were exciting, and when we actually set off, a great straggling procession of horse-drawn chariots and wagons and donkey carts and outriders and people afoot going through the streets of Etra to the River Gate, it was as good as a heroes’ parade, even if we didn’t have drums and trumpets. The chariots in which the women and girls and old people of the Family rode were high and ungainly and seemed too wide for the bridge across the Nisas; but Sem and Tan and all the drivers and outriders were in their glory, guiding the teams across, hoofs clattering on the bridge, plumes on the harnesses nodding. Sotur’s elder brothers rode ahead with Yaven on fine saddle horses. The wagons and carts came creaking behind, with a lot of shouting and whipcracking, and the inevitable donkey who did not want to cross the bridge. Some of the women and little children rode on the wagons, high on the piled-up goods and foodstuff, but most of us walked, and when people stopped to watch us go by, Tib and I waved at them with patronising pity, because we were going to the country and they, poor cockroaches, had to stay all summer in the city.

Tib and I were like dogs on an outing, traveling three times farther than anybody else because we kept running up the line of the procession and back to the back again. By noon we had become a bit less energetic and mostly stayed close to the women’s wagon, where Sallo and Ris had to ride, because they were getting to the age where girls can’t run loose; they had Oco with them, and several babies, and the kitchen women, who were always good for a handout of food when Tib and I came panting by.

The road was going up now, winding among small hillside fields and oak groves; ahead were the round green summits of the Ventine Hills. As

we climbed we began to be able to look back over the countryside and see the silver curve of the Nisas where it ran down to the wider river Morr. Across the Nisas was Etra, our city, a hazy huddle of roofs of thatch and wood and red tile in the circle of its walls, with four towered gates of yellowish stone. There was the bulk of the Senate House, and the dome of the Forefathers' Shrine. We tried to make out the roofs of Arcamand, and were sure we saw the tops of the sycamore grove by the wall where we used to drill with Torm—miles away, years ago . . .

The wagons creaked slower and slower, the horses strained at the climb, the drivers flicked their whips, the gaudy tops of the chariots up ahead dipped and rocked as the high wheels lurched in the ruts of the dusty road. The sun was hot, the breeze in the shade of the roadside oaks cool. Cattle and goats in the wood-fenced pastures watched our procession solemnly; colts at a horse farm went bucking off stiff-legged at the sight of the chariots, and then came mincing back to have another look. Somebody came running down the line of carts and wagons, a girl—Sotur, who had escaped from the Family and now clambered up onto the wagon to sit with Ris and Sallo. She was flushed with the excitement of her escapade and much more talkative than usual—"I told Mother Falimer-ío I wanted to ride outside, so she said go ahead, so I came back here. It's all stuffy and jouncy in the chariots, and Redili's baby threw up. It's much better here!" Pretty soon she began to sing, raising her sweet, strong voice in one of the old rounds everybody knew. Sallo and Ris joined in, and the kitchen women, and then people walking or riding in other wagons up the line sang too, so the music carried us up the road into the hills of Vente.

We came to the Arca farm after sunset, a long day's journey of ten miles.

To look back on that summer and the summers after it is like looking across the sea to an island, remote and golden over the water, hardly believing that one lived there once. Yet it's still here within me, sweet and intense: the smell of dry hay, the endless shrill chant of crickets on the hills, the taste of a ripe, sun-warmed, stolen apricot, the weight of a rough stone in my hands, the track of a falling star through the great summer constellations.

All the young people slept outdoors, ate together, played together—Yaven, Astano and Sotur and the cousins from Herramand, and Sallo and I,

Tib and Ris and Oco. The cousins were a skinny boy and girl of thirteen and ten, Uter and Umo; they had been unwell and their mother, Sotur's elder sister, brought them to the farm hoping the country air would be good for them. There was a whole scrabble of little kids, too—Family babies, Sotur's nieces and nephews, and slave children being mothered—but the women looked after them and we had little to do with them. We "big ones" had lessons with Everra early in the morning and then were set free for the rest of the long, hot day. There was no work for us. The slave women from the city waited on the Family and looked after the huge old farmhouse along with its regular housekeepers, of whom there were plenty. Tib had been brought as a kitchen boy, but was so unneeded that he was released to study and play with us. Everything else on the farm was in the hands of its people. They lived in a fair-sized village, down the hill from the great house, in an oak grove by a stream, and did whatever it was farm people did. We city children knew nothing of them, and were ordered to keep out of their way.

That was easy. We were busy with our own doings from morning till night, exploring the hills and forests, wading and splashing in the shallow streams, building dams, raiding orchards, making willow whistles and daisy chains and tree houses, doing everything, doing nothing, whistling and singing and chattering like a flock of starlings. Yaven spent some time with the grown-ups but much more with us, leading us on expeditions up into the hills, or organising us to put on a play or dance to entertain the Family. Everra would write us out a little masque or drama; Astano, Ris, and Sallo had been trained in dance, and with Sotur's pure, true voice to lead the singing, and Yaven playing the lyre, we put on some pretty shows, using the big threshing floor as our stage and the haybarn as our backstage. Tib and I were sometimes the comic relief and sometimes the army. I loved the rehearsals, and the costumes, and the tension and thrill of those evenings; all of us did, and as soon as we'd put on a show and been politely applauded by our noble audience, we started discussing the next one and begging Teacher-dí for a subject.

But the best times of all were the nights after the hot days of midsummer, when it finally began to cool off, and a little wind stirred from the west though heat lightning still played in the dark sky to the

south, and we lay on our straw-stuffed mattresses out under the stars and talked, and talked, and talked . . . and one by one fell silent, fell asleep . . .

If eternity had a season, it would be midsummer. Autumn, winter, spring are all change and passage, but at the height of summer the year stands poised. It's only a passing moment, but even as it passes the heart knows it cannot change.

Good as my memory is, I'm not always sure what happened in which summer of those three we spent at Vente, because they seem all one long golden day and starlit night.

I do remember from the first summer how pleasant it was not to have Torm and Hoby with us. Sallo and I spoke of it to each other with surprise, having scarcely known how Hoby's hostility oppressed us or how much we feared Torm's outbreaks. Miv's death, though we seldom spoke of it, had made our dread of Torm urgent and immediate. It was wonderful to be completely away from him.

Astano and Yaven seemed to be relieved and released by his absence as much as we were. They were older, they were Family, but here they played with us without observance of age or class. It was the last summer of Yaven's boyhood and he enjoyed it as a boy, active, high-spirited, careless of his dignity, joyful in his strength. With him and us and away from the restraint of the women of the Family, his sister Astano too became merry and bold. It was Astano who first led us on a fruit raid in our neighbor's orchards. "Oh, they'll never miss a few apricots," she said, and showed us the shortcut to the back of the orchard where the pickers hadn't come yet and wouldn't notice us . . .

Although they did, of course, and taking us for common thieves, came shouting and hurling rocks and clods at us with deadlier intent than ever Tib and I had when we were being Votusans. We fled. When we got onto our own land, Yaven, panting and laughing, recited from *The Bridge on the Nisas*—

> Then fled the Morvan soldiers,
> The men of Morva ran,
> Like sheep before the ravening wolf,
> They fled the Etran van!

“Those men are horrible,” Ris said. She’d barely gotten away from a big fellow who chased her to the borderline and threw a rock after her, which luckily just grazed her arm. “Brutes!”

Sallo was comforting little Oco, who had been following us into the orchard when we all came flying past her in a shower of rocks and clods. Oco was scared, but soon reassured by our laughter and Yaven’s posturing. Yaven was always aware of the younger children’s fears and feelings, and was particularly gentle with Oco. He picked her up to ride on his shoulder while he declaimed,

Are we then men of Morva,
To flee before the foe,
Or shall we fight for Etra,
Like our fathers long ago?

“They’re just mean,” Astano declared. “The apricots are falling off the trees, they’ll never get them all picked.”

“We’re actually helping them pick,” said Sotur.

“Exactly. They’re just mean and stupid.”

“I suppose we could go ask Senator Obbe if we could pick some fruit in his orchard,” said Uter, one of the skinny cousins from Herramand, a very law-abiding kind of boy.

“It tastes a lot better when you don’t ask,” Yaven said.

I was inspired by memories of our skirmishes and sieges in the sycamore grove, which I still missed despite their wretched outcome. I said, “They’re Morvans. Cowardly, brutal, selfish Morvans. Are we of Etra to endure their insults?”

“Certainly not!” said Yaven. “We are to eat their apricots!”

“When do they stop picking?” Sotur asked.

“Evening,” somebody said. Nobody really knew; we paid no attention to the activities of the farm workers, which went on around us like the doings of the bees and ants and birds and mice, the business of another species. Sotur was for coming back at night and helping ourselves freely to apricots. Tib thought they left dogs in the Obbe orchards to guard them at night. Yaven, taken by my warlike stance, suggested that we plan a raid on the orchards of Morva, but properly conducted this time, with

reconnoitering beforehand, and lookouts posted, and perhaps some ammunition stockpiled with which to respond to enemy missiles and defend our retreat if necessary.

So began the great war between “Etran” Arca and “Morvan” Obbe, which went on in one orchard or another for a month. The farm workers on the Obbe estate soon were keenly aware of us and our depredations, and if we posted lookouts, so did they; but our time was free, we could choose when to strike, while they were bound to their work, to pick the fruit and sort and carry it away, all under the overseer’s eye and his lash if they were slow or lazy. We were like birds, flitting in and stealing and flitting off again. We thought nothing of their anger, their hatred of us, and taunted them mercilessly when we’d made a particularly good haul. They’d learned that we weren’t all slave children as they’d thought at first, and that tied their hands. If a slave threw a rock and hit a young member of the Arca Family, the whole orchard crew might be in mortal trouble. So they had to hold their fire and try to intimidate us merely by numbers and by setting their cur-dogs on us.

To make up for their disadvantage we made a rule: if they saw us, we had to retreat. It wasn’t fair, Astano said, to take fruit openly, under their noses, since they couldn’t retaliate; we had to steal it while they were there in the orchard. This rule made it extremely dangerous and exciting, with only one or two tree-robbers per expedition, but any number of watchers and warners to hoot, tweet, chirp, and whistle when the enemy came close. Then, if we’d made off with some plums or early pears, we could pop up on the home side of the boundary, display our loot, and exult in our victory.

The great fruit wars came to an end when Mother Falimer told Yaven that a little group of our farm slave children had been savagely beaten by a group of orcharders at Obbe farm, who caught them stealing plums. One boy had had his eye gouged out. The Mother said nothing to Yaven beyond telling him what had happened, but when he brought the report to the rest of us, he told us that we’d have to stop our raids. The farm children had probably hoped to be mistaken for us and so get away unhurt, but the trick hadn’t worked, and the men from Obbe had taken their rage out against them.

Yaven apologised to us formally for his thoughtlessness in leading us into doing harm, and Astano, repressing tears, joined him. “It was my fault,” she said. “Not yours, none of you.” They took full responsibility, as they would do when they were grown, when Yaven was the Father of Arcamand and Astano perhaps Mother of another household, when every decision would be theirs and theirs alone.

“I hate those awful orchard slaves,” Ris said.

“The farm people really are brutes,” Umo said regretfully.

“Foul Morvans,” Tib said.

We were all disconsolate. If we didn’t have an enemy, we needed a cause.

“I tell you what,” Yaven said. “We could do the *Fall of Sentas*.”

“Not with weapons,” Astano said very softly and lightly.

“No, of course not. I mean, like a play.”

“How?”

“Well, first we’d have to build Sentas. I was thinking the other day that the top of the hill behind the east vineyard, you know?—it’s like a citadel. There are all those big rocks up there. It would be easy to fortify it, and make some trenches and earthworks. Teacher-dí has the book here—we could get the plans out of it. Then we could take different parts, you know—Oco could be General Thur, and Gav could say the Envoy’s speeches, and Sotur could be the prophetess Yurno . . . We wouldn’t have to do the fighting parts. Just the talking.”

It didn’t sound very exciting, but we all trooped up to the hilltop, and as Yaven paced around among the big tumbled rocks and described where we could build a wall or make an earthwork, the idea of building a city began to take hold. Later in the afternoon he got Everra to bring out the book and read us passages from the epic, and our imaginations caught fire from the grand words and tragic episodes. We all chose what characters we would be—and all of us were Sentans. Nobody wanted to be a besieging warrior from Pagadi, not even the great General Thur or the hero Rurec, not even though Pagadi had won the war and destroyed the city, so that now, after hundreds of years, Sentas was still a poor little town among great ruined walls. Usually we were on the side of the winners; but we were going to build doomed Sentas, and so her cause was ours, and we would fall with her.

We built Sentas and enacted her glory and her fall, all the rest of the summer. Building was hard work up there on the hilltop in the sparse dry grass with the sun beating down and no shade except under the rock walls and towers we piled up. The two little girls, Oco and Umo, toiled up and down the hill with water from the stream while the rest of us sweated and grunted. We swore with parched mouths when a stone refused to fit in its place or slipped and came down on a finger; we greeted the water carriers with praise and rejoicing. Astano's delicate hands were rough and bruised, as hard, the Mother said, as horse hoofs; but the Mother smiled and did not reprove. She even came out several times and walked up the Hill of Sentas to see how the work was going. Yaven and Astano showed her our triumphs of engineering, the Eastern Gate, the Tower of the Ancients, the defensive ramparts. Erect in her light summer robes, smooth-faced, smiling, she listened, nodded, approved. I saw her hand sometimes laid lightly, almost timidly, on her tall son's arm, and saw the yearning in the gesture though I didn't understand it. I think she was happy in our happiness and, like us, wanted it unshadowed by any thought of days past or days to come.

Everra also came up the hill frequently to oversee the plans and layout of the buildings and defenses according to the chart in his copy of the book; and we'd persuade him to stay and read to us from the epic while we took a break from rock laying and ditch digging. It was, he said, a most excellent educational opportunity, from which we would all profit. He was so enthusiastic about it that he might have been a real nuisance, demanding pedantic improvements and corrections to our architecture; but he'd begin to wilt in the heat by mid-morning and go back down, leaving us on the windy, white-hot hilltop, building up our stones and dreams.

ALL THESE MONTHS, the great farmhouse had been a household of women and children. The Father stayed in Etra because the Senate was meeting almost daily. Sotur's older brother Soter rode out to Vente every now and then to spend a night or two with his wife and children, but the other brother, Sodera, a lawyer, was kept in town by what Sotur always called his "suitcases." Great-Uncle Yaven Herro Arca, in his nineties, had been

brought along to sit out under the oak trees. Most of the time, our Yaven was the man of the house, though he chose not to play the role.

Among the farmhouse staff were a few old handymen past much real work, but most of the house people were women. They were used to running things with no masters present and were more independent both in act and manner than the city house people. There was a lack of hierarchy and protocol. Everything seemed to go along quite well without the formalities and rigidities of life at Arcamand, the creaking and straining, the needless complications. When the Mother wanted to make plum jam the way it had been made at Gallecamand when she was a girl, there wasn't the bowing and scraping there would have been in the great kitchens of Arcamand, nor the suppressed resentment at the interruption; old Acco, the chief cook of the farm, stood over the Mother as she'd stand over a prentice, and was free with her criticisms. Babies were common property; slave women cared for Family babies, of course, but also the Mother and Soter's and Sodera's wives looked after slave children, and all the "tiny ones" crawled and staggered about together and fell asleep in promiscuous heaps, like kittens.

We ate outside at long tables under the oak trees near the kitchen, and though there was a Family table and a slave table, seating wasn't all by status; Everra usually sat at the Family table at the invitation of the Mother and Yaven, while Sotur and Astano, self-invited, sat with Ris and Sallo at ours. We sorted ourselves out less by rank than by age and preference. This ease, this commonalty, was a great part of the happiness of life at Vente. But it changed, it had to change, when the Father arrived for the last few weeks of the summer, bringing both his nephews with him, and Torm.

The first evening of their arrival seemed to bode ill. The Family table was full of men now. The Family women and girls all sat there, dressed up, looking far more ladylike than they had all summer, in modest silence, while the men talked. Metter and the valets, who had ridden out with the men, sat with us and talked with one another. Everra sat with us, silent. We children were frowned at if we spoke.

Dinner was served formally and went on a long time, and after it the children of the Family—Yaven and Astano, Sotur, Umo, and Uter—all went indoors with the adults of the Family.

We five slave children, left outside, loitered about, disconsolate. It was too late to go down to Sentas. Sallo suggested we walk down the road by the farm village to see if the blackberries in the hedges were ripening. Some of the children there saw us, and hiding behind the brambly hedges, they threw stones at us—not big stones, not to kill, only pebbles, but maybe they had slingshots, for a hit stung like fury and left a small black bruise. Poor little Oco, the first to be hit, shrieked out that there was a hornet, then we all began to get stung. We saw the missiles flying over the hedge, and got a glimpse of our assailants. One, a big boy, leapt up and jeered something in his uncouth dialect. We ran. Not laughing, as we had run from the orcharders, but in real fear. We saw the twilight darkening around us and felt hatred at our backs.

When we got back to the farm, Oco and Ris were both crying. Sallo quieted Oco down. We bathed our bruises, and sat on our hay-filled mattresses as the stars came out, and talked. Sallo said, “They saw there weren’t any Family children with us.”

“But what do they hate us for?” Oco mourned.

Nobody said anything.

“Maybe because we can do a lot of things they can’t,” I said.

“And their fathers hate us,” said Sallo. “For the fruit wars.”

“I hate them,” Ris said.

“I do too,” said Oco.

“Dirty peasants,” Tib said, and I felt the same fierce contempt, and along with it the faint, sweet self-disgust of conscious prejudice, of despising what you’re afraid of.

We were silent for a long time, watching the stars come out above the black crowns of the oaks and the roofs of the house.

“Sallo,” Oco whispered. “Is he going to sleep with us?”

She meant Torm. Oco was utterly terrified of Torm. She had seen him kill her brother.

By “sleep with us” she meant would he come out, as the Family children had been doing all summer, to sleep as we did on hay mattresses under the stars.

“I don’t think so, Oco-sweet,” Sallo said in her soft voice. “I don’t think any of them will, tonight. They have to stay in and be gentlefolk.”

But waking before dawn, when the constellations of winter were fading in the brightening eastern sky, I saw Astano and Sotur get up from their mattress, wrapping their light blankets around them, and steal barefoot back to the house.

The Family children came out of the house much later than usual that morning. We hadn't decided whether we should go down to Sentas Hill without them, and were still discussing it when we saw them. Yaven called, "Come on! What are you all sitting around here for?"

Torm was not with him. The girls were in their country clothes, like us, tunics over trousers, ragged and dusty.

We joined the group. Yaven picked up Oco and put her on his shoulders. "Brave charioteer," he said, "drive your fiery steed to the high walls and gates of Sentas! Onward!" Oco gave a little squeak of a war cry, and Yaven galloped off down the path, neighing. We all galloped after him.

The phrase "a born leader" is a common one. I suppose many men are leaders by nature; there are a lot of ways to lead, and a lot of goals to lead to. The first true leader I knew was this boy of seventeen, Yaven Altanter Arca, and I have judged others by him. By that standard, leadership means personal magnetism, active intelligence, unquestioning acceptance of responsibility, and something harder to define: a tension between justice and compassion, which is never satisfied by one without the other, and so can seldom be wholly satisfied.

At this moment, Yaven was divided between his allegiance to all of us "Sentans" and the protective loyalty he felt he owed to his younger brother. Along towards noon, when it was time to send a volunteer to fetch bread and cheese and whatever else the kitchen had for us for lunch, he said, "I'll go." He came back with the lunch sack, and with Torm.

As soon as she saw Torm climbing the hill, Oco shrank into the maze of rocks behind the Tower of the Ancients. Presently Sallo slipped away with her down to the stream that ran by the foot of our hill.

Yaven showed Torm all over our rock buildings and earthworks, explaining how they followed the historic plans, and telling him of the scenes that would be enacted when we'd finished building Sentas and were ready for the siege and fall. Torm followed him about, saying little, looking stiff and uncomfortable, but he did say some words of praise for the circumvallation—our masterpiece.

Our rock buildings were small and shaky and required the eye of love to see much resemblance to towers and gates in them, but our earthworks were, on their small scale, perfectly real. We had built a palisade right around the summit of the hill, with a steep-sided ditch, the circumvallation, outside it, piling up the earth against the inner side of the palisade to brace it and give foothold to the defenders. You really could not get into Sentas except by a long single-plank bridge across the ditch and through the single gate in the palisade. Torm still didn't say much but he was clearly impressed by the size and extent of our labors.

"Here," Yaven said, "I'll lead a surprise assault—Men of Sentas! to the walls! to the gate! The enemy comes! Defend our homes!" He went off down the hill a bit while we closed the gate and ran its big wooden bolt into the socket and swarmed up onto the slanting earth inside the palisade or atop the wobbly rock walls of the inner "citadel." Then Yaven came charging up the hill and across the plank, and we all yelled defiance and rained down invisible arrows and spears upon him. He rattled the gate mightily and then sank down and died in front of it while we cheered.

Torm watched it all, not part of our game but clearly drawn to it by its nature and by our excitement.

We opened the gate and welcomed Yaven in and sat down in whatever shade we could find to eat lunch. Sotur slipped off with some food for Sallo and Oco down at the creek.

"So what do you think of Sentas?" Yaven asked.

Torm said, "It's fine. Very good." His voice had deepened; he sounded like the Father. "Only . . . It's sort of foolish. People going *biwang* . . ." He imitated the way we pretended, with empty hands, to draw a bow and shoot.

"I suppose it does look silly. You've been using real weapons all summer," Yaven said with his easy, honest courtesy.

Torm nodded, condescending.

"This is just play. A play. It did get us out of lessons, though," said Yaven. And this was true. Everra had given up any pretense of holding class, once the building of Sentas had got under way. He assured the Mother and himself that it had actually been his idea, a means of teaching us the epic poem, the history of the war between Pagadi and Sentas, and the architecture of defense.

“If you didn’t use the others, you could have swords and bows,” Torm said. “There’d be six of us.”

“They’d still be toy weapons,” Yaven said, after the slightest pause. “Not like what you’ve been learning. Ho! I wouldn’t give Sotur a sword with an edge, she’d have my liver out before I knew it!”

“But you couldn’t give slaves weapons,” Uter said, not having understood what Torm meant by “the others.” Uter was always coming out with rules and prohibitions and moralisms; Sotur called him Trudec. “It’s against the law.”

Torm went black-browed. He said nothing. I glanced at Tib, who was cringing, like me, at the memory of our punishment for playing soldiers for Torm. And I saw Yaven glance over at his sister Astano. “Get us out of this!” his glance said, and she did, promptly, speaking fluently and almost at random, as women are trained to do.

“I’d hate to have even toy weapons,” she said. “I like our air bows and arrows. I never miss with them! And they don’t hurt anybody. Anyhow we’re ages from any battles yet, aren’t we? We’d have to do all the envoys’ speeches first. The ditch took so long! We haven’t got the Tower really steady yet. But the rocks are real enough, Torm. You’ll see, when you’ve carried them around and piled them up all day. Even the little ones helped build, Umo and Oco. We’re all Sentans.”

So she fought, with what weapons she had been given, to defend the city we had built together all that summer, our city of sunlit air.

Torm shrugged. He finished chewing his bread and cheese in silence. He went down to the stream for a drink; we saw Sallo, Oco, and Sotur shrink back hiding from him among the tall grasses of the bank. He paid them no attention. He waved up at Yaven, shouted something, and set off alone back to the house on the white path by the vineyard, a sturdy, solitary figure, swinging his arms.

We went back to building for a while, but a shadow had fallen across our make-believe.

And though during what was left of the summer we all went down to work on Sentas almost daily, it was never quite the same. The Family children were called away often—Yaven and Torm and Uter to go on hunting parties with the Father and neighboring landowners, the girls to entertain the landowners’ wives. Sotur and Umo, who passionately loved

our dream-game, escaped these duties and joined us whenever they could, but Astano couldn't escape; and without her and Yaven we lacked direction, we lacked conviction.

But all the delights of Vente were still there, swimming and wading in the streams, figs coming ripe (which we didn't need to steal, because the fig trees were right behind the great house), talking together before we slept out under the stars. And we had one great final day of happiness. Astano proposed that we walk all the way up to the summit of the Ventine Hills. It was farther than we could go and return in a day, so we took food and water and blankets. One of the farm boys followed us with the baggage loaded on a jenny.

We set off very early; there was a chill in the air now before the sun rose, a foretaste of autumn. The dry grass on the hills was burnt pale gold, the shadows were longer than they had been. We climbed and climbed on an old track, a shepherds' path that wound among the great round hills. The scattered flocks of mountain sheep had no fear of us, but stared and challenged us with their harsh bleating, almost like roaring. There were no fences up here, since mountain sheep keep to their own pastures without fences or shepherds, but among the flocks were big grey dogs, wolf-guards. These dogs ignored us as we passed by. But if we stopped, a dog would begin to walk forward towards us, silent, very clearly saying, *Now you just move along and everything will be fine*. And we moved along.

Torm and Uter did not come with us. They had chosen to go wolf hunting down in the pine forests with the uncles Soter and Sodera instead. Oco and Umo, who though ten years old was not very much bigger than Oco at six, stumped along valiantly. Yaven gave Oco a ride on his shoulders now and then, and during the last, long, steep pull, in late afternoon, we took the food and blankets off the jenny and put the two little girls up on her pack saddle. She was a pretty creature, grey as a mouse. I had no idea what a jenny was; she looked like a small horse to me. Sotur explained that if her father had been a donkey and her mother a horse she would have been a mule, but since her mother had been a donkey and her father a horse, she was a jenny. The boy who had been leading her stood listening to this explanation with the dull, glowering expression the farm people seemed always to have.

“That’s right, isn’t it, Comy?” Sotur asked him. He jerked his head and looked away, scowling. “It’s all in who your ancestors are,” Sotur said to the jenny, “isn’t it, Mousie?”

The boy Comy tugged at the halter and Mousie walked along peaceably, Oco and Umo clinging to the saddle, scared and gleeful. We all trudged along with our light burdens, which we certainly could have carried all day. But we were glad to come up at last onto the very summit of the highest hill and stop climbing and stand gazing at the great view that lay all around us, miles and miles of sunlit land, pale gold fading into blue, the long shadows of August falling in the folds of the hills. There was Etra, remote and tiny in the vast sweep of the plains; we could see farmhouses and villages all along the courses of the streams and the river Morr, and farsighted Yaven said he could make out the walls of Casicar and a tower above them, though I could see only a kind of smudge there on the deep bend of the Morr. East that way and southward the land was hilly and broken, but to the north and west it fell away and widened into immense, dim levels, green fading into the blue of distance.

“That’s the Daneran Forest,” Yaven said, looking northeast.

“That’s the Marshes,” Astano said, looking north, and Sotur said, “Where you and Gav came from, Sallo.”

Sallo stood beside me and we looked that way for a long time. It gave me a strange, cold thrill to see that vastness, that unknown country where we had been born. All I knew of the people of the Marshes was that they weren’t city people, they were uncivilised, barbarians, natives. We had ancestors there, as free people did. We had been born free. It troubled me to think about that. It was a useless thought. What did it have to do with my life in Etra, with my Family of Arcamand?

“Do you remember the Marshes at all?” Sotur asked us.

Sallo shook her head, but I said, to my own surprise, “Sometimes I think I do.”

“What was it like?”

I felt foolish describing that simple memory or vision aloud to them. “Just water, and reeds growing in the water, and little islands . . . and there was a blue hill away far off . . . Maybe it was this hill.”

“You were only a baby, Gav,” Sallo said, with just a touch of cautioning in her voice. “I was two or three, and I can’t remember anything.”

“Not about being stolen?” Sotur asked, disappointed. “That would have been exciting.”

“I don’t remember anything but Arcamand, Sotur-ío,” Sallo said in her soft voice, smiling.

We spread our feast out on the thin dry grass of the hilltop and ate it as the sun went down in glory, revealing the ocean to us by the gleam of the high horizon where it set. We sat and talked, in all the old ease and companionship of the long summer. The little ones fell asleep. Sallo fell asleep with her head on my lap. Ris brought me a blanket, and I tucked it round my sister as best I could. The stars were coming out. The boy Comy, who had sat all evening at a distance, between us and the picketed jenny, facing away from us, began to sing. At first I didn’t know what I was hearing, it was such a thin, strange, sad sound, like the vibrations in the air after a bell has been struck. It rose and trembled and died away.

“Sing again, Comy,” Sotur murmured. “Please.”

He was silent for so long we thought he would not sing, but then the faint tremor of sound began again, the thinnest thread of music, the overtones of a tune. It was inexpressibly sad and yet serene, untroubled. Again it died away, and we listened for it, wanting it to return.

It was utterly silent now up on the wide hill, and the glimmer of starlight was stronger than the last blue-brown light far down in the west.

The jenny stamped and made a little huh-huh noise in her chest, and we laughed at that, and talked a little more, softly. Then we slept.

Chapter 4

THE NEXT couple of years went along without excitement. Sallo and I swept the floors of the great house and went to our lessons daily. Nobody missed Hoby, not even Tib, I think. Torm, mentally practicing the discipline of the swordsman, was sullen, aloof, and obedient in the classroom. Once or twice when his impatience with the lessons or the teacher threatened to overcome him, he excused himself and left. Yaven was mostly away with the army. Etra had no ongoing war at that time, so young officers like Yaven were trained in exercises and drills or put on guard duty at the borders; now and then he was sent home on leave, looking very fit and cheerful. We went both of those summers to the Vente farm, and there too were no great doings, just the lazy, ordinary happiness of being there. Yaven didn't come with us; he spent the first summer in training, and during the second he accompanied the Father on a diplomatic mission to Gallec. Torm spent both summers at the school of swordsmanship. So Astano was our leader.

She led us to Sentas Hill the very first evening. That was a shock and a grief at first, for we found it almost in ruins. The moat had silted up with winter rains, the earthwork behind the palisade had slipped; the palisade itself had been torn down in several places and the rock piles that formed the Tower and the Gates had been knocked apart, not by weather, but by human malice.

"Those filthy peasants," Tib growled—he could growl now, his voice was changing. We all moped about the dilapidated place a while, feeling the same hateful, shameful contempt for the farm children we'd felt when they threw stones at us, and mourning the defilement of our city of dreams. But Astano and Sotur took heart, discussing how easily we could restore the palisade, and beginning even in the dusk to pile up rocks for the

Tower again. So we went back to the house, set out our pallets under the stars, and lay planning the rebuilding of Sentas.

Sotur said, “You know, if we could get some of them to help, to work on it, they might not hate it.”

“Ugh! I don’t want any of them around,” said Ris. “They’re foul.”

“One couldn’t trust them,” said Uter, who was less skinny and bony this summer, but no less prim.

“The one with the jenny was all right,” his sister Umo said.

“Comy,” Astano said. “Yes, he was nice. Remember when he sang?”

We all lay remembering that golden, mysterious evening on the summit of the hills.

“We’d have to ask the foreman,” Astano said to Sotur, and they briefly discussed the chances of getting any farm slave released to us. “Only if we said they were to work for us,” Sotur said, and Astano replied, “Well, they would. We worked as hard as any of them do! Digging that moat was awful! And we never could have done it without Yaven.”

“But it would be different,” Sotur said. “Giving orders . . .”

Astano said, “Yes.”

And there they left it. The idea was not mentioned again.

We rebuilt Sentas, even if not to Yaven’s or Everra’s standards. And when it was rebuilt, we held a ceremony of purification, circling the walls within, not in mockery, but as it was described in Garro’s poem, with our teacher leading the procession as the high priest and lighting the sacred fire in the citadel. All summer we often went to that hilltop as a group or in pairs or singly, all of us feeling it to be, amid all the wealth of woods and hills and streamside that the farm offered, our dearest place, our fortress and retreat.

Aside from repairing Sentas, we had no great projects; we put on a few dance-plays, but mostly what I remember is swimming with Tib in pools under the willows and alders, and lazing about in the shade talking, and going on long, desultory explorations of the woods south of the house. We did lessons for a half-morning daily with our teacher, and Ris and Sallo were often kept on for music lessons with Sotur and Umo, for a singing teacher had come from Herramand. Sotur’s little niece Utte had graduated from the “tiny ones” to run around with us, under Oco’s particular care; and sometimes we took a whole batch of the older babies down to the

stream and supervised the splashing and screaming and shrieking and sleeping, all through a long, hot afternoon.

Sotur's aunts and the Mother often joined us there, and sometimes Uter and Tib and I were sent away because the women and the older girls were going to bathe. Uter was convinced that the farm boys hid in the bushes to spy on them. He would patrol up and down officiously, ordering Tib and me to help him "keep the vile brutes away from the women." Knowing the terrible punishment for such a transgression against the sacredness of the Mother, I was sure the farm slaves would never come anywhere near our bathing pool; but Uter's mind ran on such things, fascinated by the idea of pollution.

I was slow in my adolescence. To me Uter's obsessions were as stupid as Tib's sniggering attempts at manly remarks about what you might see if you did hide in the bushes. I knew what women looked like. I'd lived in the women's quarters all my life. Just because Tib had been sent across to the men's barrack last winter, he acted as if there was something special about a woman with her clothes off. It was, I thought, incredibly childish.

It had nothing to do with what I felt, lately, when I heard Sotur sing. That was entirely different. It had nothing to do with bodies. It was my soul that listened and was filled with pain and glory and unspeakable yearning. . . .

Late that summer Yaven and Torm came to Vente with the Father, and the division between Family and slaves was again drawn deep by the presence of the Family men. I went out one day seeking solitude. Among the forested hills south of the farmhouse I found a beautiful oak grove in the fold of two hills. A clear stream ran down through it, and there was a strange little structure of rock halfway up the slope: a shrine, certainly, but to what god I did not know. I told Sallo about it, and she wanted to see it. So one afternoon I took her and Ris and Tib there. Tib saw nothing to interest him in the place; he was restless, and soon roamed off back to the farm. Ris and Sallo felt as I did that there was some presence or blessing in the grove, the glade, the ruined altar. They settled down in the thin shade of the old oaks, near the small, quick-running creek, on what had once been a lawn around the shrine. Each of them had her drop-spindle and a sack of cloudy wool, for they were at the age now when women were to be seen doing women's work wherever they were. That they could run off

with me, unguarded, not even asking permission, was part of the miraculous ease of life at Vente. Anywhere else, two house-slave girls of fourteen would not have been allowed to leave the house at all. But they were good girls; they took their work with them; and the Mother trusted them as she trusted the benevolence of the place. So we sat on the thin grass of the slope in the hot August shade, feeling the cool breath of the running water, and were silent for a long time, at peace, in freedom.

"I wonder if it was an altar to Mé," Ris said.

Sallo shook her head. "It's not the right shape," she said.

"Who, then?"

"Maybe some god that only lived here."

"An oak-tree god," I said.

"That would be Iene. No," Sallo said, with unusual certainty, "it isn't Iene. It was a god that was here. This place's god. Its spirit."

"What should we leave as an offering?" Ris asked, half serious, half joking.

"I don't know," Sallo said. "We'll find out."

Ris spun a while, the motion of her arm and hand graceful and hypnotic. Ris was not as pretty as Sallo, but calm and charming in her ripening womanhood, with a splendid mane of glossy black hair, and a dreamy look in her long eyes. She heaved a quiet sigh and said, "I don't ever want to leave here."

She would be given in a couple of years, probably to young Odiran Edir, possibly to the heir of Herramand—wherever the interests and allegiances and debts of Arca indicated. We all knew that. The slave girls had been brought up to be given. Ris trusted her House to give her where she would be valued and well treated. She had no dread and a good deal of lively curiosity about where and to whom she would be sent. I'd heard her and Sallo talking about it. Sallo would not be given away from our House; she was destined for Yaven, that was equally well known. But at Arcamand daughters of the Family were not married off early, and slave girls were not given at thirteen or fourteen even if they were physically mature. Iemmer repeated the Mother's words to our girls—"A woman is healthier and lives longer if she has had time to grow into her womanhood, and does not bear children while she is still a child." And Everra quoted Trudec in approval: "Let a maiden remain a maiden until she be full grown and have

wisdom, for the worship of a virgin daughter is most pleasing to her Ancestors." And Sem the hostler said, "You don't breed a yearling filly, do you?"

So Ris wasn't speaking in imminent concern about having to leave home and learn how a gift-girl was treated at Edirmand or Herramand, but only in the knowledge that within a few years she'd be sent into a new life, and seldom if ever see us, and almost certainly never know any such freedom as this again.

Her unprotesting melancholy touched Sallo and me, safe as we were in knowing we would always live with our own Family and people.

"What would you do, Ris," my sister asked, looking across the stream into the warm, shadowy depths of the woods, "if you were set free?"

"They don't set girls free," Ris said, practical and accurate. "Only men who do something heroic. Like that tiresome slave who saved his master's treasure in the *Fables*."

"But there are countries where there aren't any slaves. If you lived there you'd *be* free. Everybody is."

"But I'd be a foreigner," Ris said with a laugh. "How do I know what I'd do? Crazy foreign things!"

"Well, but pretend. If you did get set free, here, in Etra."

Ris set herself to think about it. "If I was a freedwoman, I could get married. So I could keep my own babies . . . But I'd have to look after them myself whether I wanted to or not, wouldn't I? I don't know. I don't know any freedwomen. I don't know what it's like. What would you do?"

"I don't know," Sallo said. "I don't know why I think about it. But I do."

"It would be nice to be married," Ris said after a while, thoughtfully. "So that you *knew*." I did not know what she meant.

"Oh, yes!" Sallo said, heartfelt.

"But you *do* know, Sal. Yaven-dí wouldn't ever pass you around."

"No, he wouldn't," Sallo said, and there was a tenderness in her voice, as always when she spoke of Yaven, and a proud embarrassment.

I understood now that Ris had meant a master's power to give away the girl he'd been given, or lend her out to other men, or send her to the women's quarters to nurse other women's babies, whatever he pleased—a power she had no part in but must simply submit to. Thinking about that

made me feel extremely lucky to be a man. So in turn I was a little embarrassed when Sallo asked me, “What would you do, Gav?”

“If I was set free?”

She nodded, looking at me with that same loving tenderness and pride but no embarrassment, only a little teasing.

I thought a while and said, “Well, I’d like to travel. I’d like to go to Mesun, where the University is. And I’d like to see Pagadi. And maybe the ruins of Sentas. And cities you read about, like Resva of the Towers, and Ansul the Beautiful, with four canals and fifteen bridges . . .”

“And then?”

“Then I’d come back to Arcamand with a lot of new books! Teacher-dí won’t even talk about getting any new books. ‘Oldest is safest,’ ” I mouthed froggily, imitating Everra being pompous. Ris and Sallo giggled. And that was all our conversation on a freedom we could not imagine.

Nor did we leave any offering to the spirit of that place, unless remembrance is a kind of offering.

The following summer, our stay at the farm was cut short by rumors of war.

We arrived there as usual, with the cousins from Herramand, and on the first evening all nine of us went out to Sentas Hill expecting to find it in ruins again. But though the winter rains had damaged the moat and earthworks, the walls and towers stood, and had even been built higher in places. Some of the farm children must have taken it over and made it their own refuge or play fortress. Umo and Uter were indignant, feeling our Sentas had been invaded, polluted, but Astano said, “Maybe it will always be here, now.”

Oco and Umo were the only ones who worked much that summer at cleaning out the moat and strengthening the earthworks and palisade. Astano and Sotur were kept with the women much of the time, and the rest of us dispersed on our own pursuits. Tib and I swam and fished; Sallo and I went back to the oak-grove shrine when she could get away from the house, with Ris or by ourselves. And I made an unexpected friend.

I had been giving the little girls a hand at bracing up the palisade at Sentas and was coming home through the vineyard in the heat of the day, crickets shrilling and cicadas rasping far and near in the trance of light and heat. A vineyard worker was coming towards me down another row. I

glimpsed him now and then between the high vines, on which the grape clusters were just beginning to swell. As we passed each other he stopped and said, “Dí.” It was how the country people spoke to a master, not by name, merely with the honorific.

Surprised, I stopped and peered at him around the long-armed vine. I recognised him, Comy, the boy who had led the jenny when we climbed to the summit of the hills, and who had sung that evening. He looked much older. I would have taken him for a grown man. He had a sparse stubble of beard and his face was hard and bony. I said his name.

He was clearly surprised and gratified that I knew him. He stood silent a while and then said, “Hope it was all right what we did at the rock place.”

“It was fine,” I said.

“It was some of Meriv’s fellows knocked it down last year.”

“It’s all right. It’s just a game.” I didn’t know what to say to this grim fellow. His accent was hard for me to understand. I could smell his stale sweat though we were four or five feet apart. He was barefoot and his dark calloused feet stood in the earth like the vine roots.

There was a long silence, and I was about to say goodbye and go on when Comy said, “I can show you a good fishing place.”

I’d done a lot of fishing that summer. Tib and I heard that there were streams where the farm people caught salmon-trout, though we’d never caught any. I said something to show my interest, and Comy said, “At the rock fort this evening,” and went striding on down between the vines.

Though I was dubious about the whole venture, I went back to Sentas late in the afternoon, telling myself that if Comy didn’t turn up I could do a little more work for Oco and Umo. But I saw him coming through the vineyard not long after I got there. I went down and joined him and we went in silence up the creek at the hill’s foot till it joined a larger stream, and then along that for a half mile or so on a thread of a path through willows and alders and laurels, till at the foot of a hill the water came down into deep basins where it flowed full and still among great smooth boulders. We each had our rudimentary fishing gear. In silence we baited our lines and chose a boulder to stand on and cast out into the dark pools. It was a warm, still evening in the long days of the year, not yet sunset for an hour or so. The light filtered through the trees in soft slanting shafts. Tiny flies dimpled the water’s surface and flitted in the darkness under the

banks. Within a minute a fish rose to my line, and I brought it in by instinct or accident—a splendid rosy-spotted creature weighing three or four pounds. I hardly knew what to do with such a catch. I saw Comy's grin. "Beginner's luck," he said, throwing out his line again.

As we stood there, casting and now and then catching, I felt a liking and gratitude to the silent youth who stood there on the rocks over the water, thin, rawboned, enigmatic. I didn't know why he reached out to me across the ignorance and enmity that kept the farm people and the city people apart, or how he knew that we could make friends despite the enormous difference of our knowledge and experience. But we did; we said almost nothing, but in our silence there was trust.

When the ruddy light had died away among the trees, we gathered up our catch. He had a net pouch, and I put my fish into it, the first grand big one and two smaller ones, along with the two he'd caught, one salmon-trout and one thin fierce-mouthed fish, a pikelet maybe. I followed him down the invisible path through the dusky woods and out at last into the vineyard. It was almost dark by then even under the open sky. When we got to the road I said, "Thanks, Comy."

He nodded, and stopped to give me my fish.

"Keep them."

He hesitated.

"I can't cook them."

He shrugged, and his smile flashed in the dusk. He muttered thanks and made off, vanishing almost at once in the twilight among the high vines with their reaching arms.

After that I went fishing with Comy several times, always at a different place. It was a little unnerving to realise that he always knew where I was, when he was free to find me and ask, almost wordlessly, if I wanted to go fishing that evening. I never brought Tib, never even told him of my expeditions with Comy; I felt that I had no right to. If Comy wanted Tib along he would have asked him. I did tell Sallo about Comy, because I had no secrets from her. She liked hearing about him. When I puzzled at his choosing me for a companion and taking me to his prized fishing pools, she said, "Well, he's lonely, probably, and he likes you."

"How would he know he liked me?"

“Seeing you that day we climbed the hills. And they see more of us than we do of them, I’m sure . . . He could tell he could trust you.”

“It’s sort of like knowing a wolf,” I said.

“I wish we could go to their village,” my sister said. “It seems so strange that we can’t. Like they really were wild animals or something. Some of the women who come up to the farmhouse are relatives of the house people. They seem nice enough, only it’s hard to understand what they say.”

This put it into my head to ask Comy if I could go home with him sometime, for I too had always been curious about those dark houses down in the valley, even if our orchard wars and the ambush on the road had put us at odds with the farm people. So the next time Comy and I came up from the river in the twilight, I said, “I’ll go on with you.” We had a really good catch that night, our prize a monster salmon-trout as long as my forearm. Carrying it made a kind of excuse. He said nothing, and after a while I said, “Will they mind?”

I think he had as much trouble figuring out what the words I used meant as I did with his dialect. He pondered, and finally shrugged. We went on into the village. Smoke was rising from the chimneys of the longhouses and the cabins and there were strong smells of cooking. Dark figures passed us in the rutted, dusty street that rambled among the houses, and dogs barked insistently. Comy turned aside not to a longhouse as I had expected but to one of the shambling cabins, built up on short poles to keep them from the winter mud. A man was sitting out on the wooden steps that led up to the door. I had seen him working in the vineyards. He and Comy greeted each other with a kind of grunt and the man said, “Who’s that?”

“From the House,” Comy said.

“Hey,” the man said, startled, stiffening, ready to get up. I think he thought Comy had brought one of the Family boys here, and was terrified. Comy said something that identified me as a house slave and calmed the man down. He stared at me in silence. I felt extremely uncomfortable, but having come this far didn’t want to back out. I said, “May I come in?”

Comy hesitated and gave his hunching shrug. He led me into the house. It was completely dark inside except for the dim glow of a fire under heavy ashes in the hearth. There were people—women, an old man, some

children—dark bulks crowded in the heavy air that smelled of human bodies and dogs and food and wood and earth and smoke. Comy took the big fish from me and gave it and our other catch to a woman whom I could see only as a bulky shadow and the flash of an eye. He and she said a word or two, and she turned to me: “D’you want to eat with us then, dí?” Her voice seemed unfriendly, even sneering, yet she waited for an answer.

“No, ma-ío, I have to get home, thank you,” I said.

“It’s a grand fish,” she said, holding up the big one.

“Thanks, Comy,” I said, backing out. “Luck and Ennu bless the house!” And I made off, intimidated and appalled and glad to get away, yet also glad I had gone so far. At least I had a little to tell Sallo.

She guessed that it was a family in the cabin, that the man on the steps may have been Comy’s father; she had gathered from talk among the farmhouse women that though of course there was no marriage, these country people commonly lived with their spouse and children, or sometimes spouses and children. It was all to the good of the farm if the slaves bred up more slaves who knew the work and the land and nothing else, whose whole life was in that dark village by the stream.

“I wish I could meet Comy again,” Sallo said.

The next time he found me, I said, “Do you know the old altar in the oak grove?”

He nodded; of course he did; Comy knew every rock and tree and stream and field on the Vente farm and for miles around it.

“Meet us there this evening,” I said. “Instead of fishing.”

“Who’s us?”

“My sister.”

He thought about it, gave his shrug-nod, and went off.

Sallo and I were there an hour or so before sunset. She sat with her spinning, the cloudy mass of fine-carded wool endlessly turning under her fingers to a grey-brown, even, endless thread. Comy appeared silently, coming up the little streambed among the willow shrubs. She greeted him, and he nodded and sat down at some distance from us. She asked him if he was a vineyarder and he said yes, and told us a little about the work, haltingly. “Do you still sing, Comy?” she asked, and he shrugged and nodded.

“Will you?”

As before, on the hilltop, he made no reply and was silent for a long time; then he sang, that same strange, high, soft singing that seemed to have no source or center, as if it did not come from a human throat but hung in the air like the song of insects, wordless but sad beyond all words.

I planned to bring Sotur to the oak grove, maybe to hear Comy sing, maybe just to sit there with Sallo and me in the peace of the place. I could imagine what it would be like when Sotur was there, how she would go look at the altar and maybe know what god it belonged to, how she would go down to the little stream and maybe wade in it a bit to get cool, how she and Sallo would sit side by side, spinning and talking softly, laughing sometimes. I decided it would be best if Sallo asked her to come. Lately I wanted very much to talk to Sotur but for some reason found it harder and harder to do so. And I put off asking Sallo to ask Sotur to come with us to the oak grove, I don't know why, maybe because I had such pleasure in thinking about it, imagining it . . . and then it was too late.

Sotur's brothers and Torm came riding from Etra all in haste and full of alarms and orders: We must pack up tonight and leave the farm first thing in the morning; marauders from Votus had crossed the Morr and burned the vineyards and orchards of Merto, a village not ten miles south of Vente. They could be here at any moment. Torm was in his element, striding about, brusque and warlike. He ordered that the girls of the Family sleep in the house, and we few who stayed outdoors got little sleep, for Torm kept pacing past us and around the house, keeping watch. Very early, before sunrise, the Father himself rode in; he had been kept at civic duties until midnight, but his worry for us had not let him wait in the city.

The morning was bright and hot. The farmhouse people worked hard with us to get everything packed and loaded, and called goodbye to us mournfully as the procession set off at last down the long hill road. The slaves at work in the fields glanced up as we passed, unspeaking. I looked for Comy, but saw no one I knew. The people of the farm would have to wait there, defenseless, in hope that the soldiers sent out from Etra would intercept the marauders. The Father had reassured them that a large force had gone out and would by now be between Merto and Vente, driving the Votusans back to the river.

It was hot already and dusty on the road. Torm, riding a nervous, foaming, sweating horse, harried the drivers with his shouts to speed up,

move on, hurry! The Father, jogging along beside the Mother's chariot, said nothing to Torm to calm him down. The Father had always been firm and stern with Yaven, but he seemed increasingly reluctant to chide Torm or even restrain him. Sallo and I talked about it as we walked. I thought he was afraid of sending Torm into one of his fury fits. Sallo nodded, but added, "Yaven isn't like his father. Torm is. At least in looks. He walks just like him now. Just like Twinny does."

That was pretty harsh talk for gentle Sallo, but she'd always disliked both Torm and Hoby. We shut up abruptly when we realised that Sotur-ío had come up with us on foot and might have heard us discussing our Father and his sons. Sotur said nothing, just walked along steadily with us, her face closed and frowning. I think she hadn't obtained permission to get down and walk, certainly not to walk with the slaves, but had escaped from the Family, as she'd often done before. All she said to us, after we had walked a long way together in silence, was, "Oh, Sallo, Gav . . . the summers are over." And I saw tears in her eyes.

Chapter 5

THE RAIDERS were driven back to the river, where our soldiers cornered them; not many got back to Votus.

But we didn't return to Vente that summer, nor the next. Incursions and alarms were constant: from Votus, from Osc, and finally from a far more powerful enemy, Casicar.

As I look back on them, those years of alarms and battles were not unhappy ones. The threat and presence of war lent tension and the gleam of excitement to ordinary matters. Perhaps men rely on war, like politics, to give them a sense of importance they lack without it; and the possibility of violence and destruction sheds a glamour on the household life which they otherwise hold in contempt. Women, I think, not needing the self-importance and not sharing the contempt, often fail to understand the virtue and necessity of warfare; but they may be caught in the glamour, and they love the beauty of courage.

Yaven was now an officer in the army of Etra. His regiment under the command of General Forre was mostly west and south of the city, fending off incursions from Osc and Morva. Fighting was sporadic, with long quiet spells while the enemy regrouped, and during these periods Yaven was often able to come home.

For his twentieth birthday, his mother gave him my sister Sallo, who was now about sixteen. The gift of a maiden "from the Mother's hands" was not made lightly, but with due formality; and it was a happy occasion, for Sallo loved Yaven with all her heart and asked only to love and serve him and him alone. He couldn't have resisted such generous tenderness if he'd wanted to, but she was what he wanted, too. Eventually of course he'd have to marry a woman of his own class, but that was years off, and didn't matter now. He and Sallo were a blissful couple, their delight in each other so clear and lively it shed pleasure around them as a candle sheds light.

When he was in the city and off duty he spent the days with his fellow officers and other young men, but every night he came home to Sallo. When he went off to his regiment she wept bitterly, and grieved and worried till he came riding home, tall and handsome and laughing, shouting, “Where’s my Sallo?”—and she came running out of the silk rooms to meet him, shy and afire with joy and pride and love, like any young soldier’s bride.

When I was thirteen I was exiled at last from the women’s rooms and sent across the court. I’d always dreaded going to the barrack, but it wasn’t as bad as I’d feared, though I grievously missed the nook where Sallo and I had always slept and talked before we slept. Tib, who’d been sent across the year before, made a show of protecting me, but it wasn’t needed; the big fellows didn’t persecute me. They were hard on some of the young boys, but evidently I’d paid my dues that night at the well, and earned their respect by my silence. They called me Marshy or Beaky, but nothing worse, and most of them simply left me alone.

During the day I saw little of any of them, since my work was now entirely in the schoolroom and library with Everra. Oco and a little boy called Pepa had taken Sallo’s and my place as sweepers. My task now was to get learning and to assist Everra in schooling the little ones. There was a new flock in the schoolroom, as Sotur’s nieces and nephews became old enough to learn their letters, along with several new slave children we had bought or traded for. Sallo, as a gift-girl, was exempt from all heavy or dirty work; she was expected only to do a modest amount of spinning or weaving, and otherwise nothing except to keep herself fresh and pretty for Yaven. She was in fact very bored when he was off with the army. She was used to active work, and found the company of the other gift-girls and the ladies’ maids tedious and stifling. She never said so, not being given to complaint, but whenever she could she got away from the silk rooms and came back to the schoolroom to continue her reading or help Everra and me with the young pupils. And often she and I met in the library, where we could talk, just the two of us alone. She confided in me as she always had done, and relied on me and knew I relied on her. Our companionship was the joy of my life. My sister was my other soul. Only with her was I wholly free and at peace. Only to her could I ever speak the entire truth.

I have said nothing this long time about what I called “remembering,” those visions or waking dreams I had as a young child. They came to me still, though less often. My unbroken habit of not speaking of them to anyone but Sallo seems even now to make it hard to tell about them.

At Vente I scarcely ever had a memory of that kind, but when we came back to Arcamand, every now and then, usually when I was alone reading, or near falling asleep, or waking from sleep, I would see the blue hill over the shining water and the reeds and feel the slight unsteady motion of the boat. Or I’d watch the snow fall on the roofs of Etra (for they could be truly memories as well as foreseeings). Or I’d be in the graveyard by the river, or in the square watching the men fighting in the street, or in the high, dark room where the man turned his fine, sorrowful face to me and said my name.

Only rarely now did I have a new vision, remembering something I had not remembered before. Several times I remembered climbing a steep hill of a city I did not know; it was raining, and the streets between high dark houses were gloomy and strange, but there was some light shining in me or on me, as if I bore an invisible lamp—I can’t describe it better than that.

Once, the winter Sallo was given to Yaven, I saw a terrible figure, a naked man as thin and black as a mummified corpse, dancing. His head was too large, with blank bright eyes and a red hole for a mouth. I saw him from below, as if I were lying down in some dark place. I hoped not to have that vision again. Several times I remembered being in a cave with a low stone roof, faint light falling strangely on the rocks of the cave floor. And there were brief scenes, glimpses, too quick to hold and recall clearly, though when (as sometimes happened) I met the place or person in daily life, I knew that I’d been there before, or seen that face. Many people have this experience from time to time, but can’t say how it is that they seem to be remembering something which is happening for the first time. For me it was a little different, since I could remember, in the moment the event occurred, when and where I had remembered it before it occurred.

After it actually happened, my memory of it was like any memory, and I could summon it at will, which I couldn’t do with the visions of things that hadn’t happened yet. So with the snowfall, I had my memory of the event, and my memory of having seen it in a vision before it happened, and also,

now and then, the vision itself, involuntary and immediate. One snowfall, three memories.

Part of the pleasure I had in being with my sister was that I could tell her about these strange visions or rememberings, and talk over with her what they might be or mean, and so weaken the horror that clung to some of them. And she could tell me about doings among the Family.

Now that Yaven and Astano were done with their schooling and Torm had been excused from it in order to study military arts, I saw only the young children of the Family, and Sotur. She still came to study with Everra, and often to the schoolroom or the library to read. Often enough she and Sallo and I were all together and fell to talking as easily, almost, as we had used to do under the stars at the Vente farm. But never so freely. We were no longer children, and had to be conscious of our status. And I was sorely confused by my feelings for Sotur, which were a mixture of chaste adoration, which I indulged, and passionate sexual desire, which, when I recognised what it was, I feared and denied.

Desire was forbidden. Chaste adoration was allowed, but I was too tongue-tied to express it, except in very bad poems, which I never showed her. In any case, Sotur didn't want either desire or adoration. She wanted our old friendship. She was lonely.

Her closest friend had always been Astano, and Astano was now being groomed for courtship and marriage. There was talk (so Sallo told me) of betrothing Astano to Corric Beltomo Runda, the son of the richest and most powerful Senator of Etra, a man to whom our Father Altan Arca owed a good deal of his own power and influence. Sallo heard a lot of gossip of this kind in the silk rooms. She brought whatever she heard to me and we talked it over. Corric Runda, they said, had never done any military service; his particular friends were a group of young, rich freedmen and minor nobles who led a wild life; he was said to be handsome but inclined to fat. We wondered how our gentle, gallant Astano felt about Corric Runda, and whether she wanted to be betrothed to him, and how far the Father and Mother would be swayed by what she wanted.

As for Sotur, their orphaned niece, her wishes in marriage wouldn't count for much. She'd be married to make the most advantageous connection. It was the lot of almost all girls of the Families; not that different from the slave girls. Sometimes the thought of my grave, sweet-

voiced Sotur being handed off to some uncaring man drove me to burning, helpless rage, to the point where I thought I longed for it to happen—so that she'd be gone from the House, and I wouldn't have to see her daily, and be ashamed that I was only a slave and only fourteen years old and only able to write my stupid poems and yearn and yearn to touch her and never be able to touch her . . .

Sallo knew how I felt, of course; if I'd wanted to hide anything from Sallo I couldn't have. She knew that I kept, folded tight in a tiny pouch on a cord about my neck, a note Sotur had written me a year ago when I had a fever—*Get well soon dear Gavir, it is as dull as dust without you*. Sallo grieved for my impossible longing. She fretted over the injustice that allowed her love full satisfaction and utterly forbade it to mine, even in dream. Of course there were stories of love affairs between noblewomen and slaves, but they were all sad and shameful, ending in mutilation or death for the man, and for the woman maybe not death, these days, but horrible public shame and degradation. Sallo tried to make sense of these hard laws, to understand them as protecting us, and she convinced both me and herself that in fact they did protect us; but she didn't try to pretend that they were just. *Justice is in the hands of the gods*, an old poet wrote, *mortal hands hold only mercy and the sword*. I told her that line, and she liked it, and repeated it. I think it made her think of Yaven, her kind-hearted, beloved hero who held both mercy and a sword.

Romantic love and desire was my torment. Sallo was my solace, and so was my work.

Everra had finally given me free run of the library of Arcamand, which till then I had never entered, even when I was a sweeper boy and went all over the house. Its door was on the corridor past the domed shrine of the Ancestors. When I first entered it, I felt the fear of crossing a sacred threshold almost as I might have done if I had transgressed and gone among the Ancestors. It was a small room, well lighted by high windows of clear glass. There were over two hundred books on its shelves, all carefully arranged and dusted by Everra. The room smelled of books, that subtle smell which to some is stuffy and to others intoxicating, and it was silent. No one ever came down that corridor except to sweep it or to enter the library, and no one entered the library except Everra, Sotur, Sallo, and me.

The girls were allowed because Sotur had asked our teacher to allow her and Sallo the privilege, and Everra couldn't refuse her anything. Sotur was the only older child of the Family pursuing her reading or studies, for neither Yaven nor Astano was free to do what they liked any more. She told Everra that he had given her and Sallo the soul's hunger for books and thoughts, and must not deprive them now that Sallo was starving among the inanities of the silk rooms and she among the pomposities of merchants and the illiteracy of politicians. So, with the permission of the Father and Mother, and with many cautions about indiscriminate reading, he gave them each a key.

It was hard for me to admit it to myself, and I never talked about it with Sallo or Sotur, but the long-desired library was a disappointment. I already knew more than half the books in it, and the ones I didn't know, that looked so mysterious and treasurable sitting on the shelves in their dark leather covers or scroll boxes, mostly turned out to be dull—annals of law, compendia, endless epic poems by mediocre poets. They had all been there for at least fifty years, sometimes much longer. Everra was proud of the fact. "No modern trash for Arcamand," he said. I was willing to believe him that most modern writing was trash, on the evidence that so much old writing was trash; but I didn't put it that way to him.

Still, the library became dear to me as a place to be with Sallo, with Sotur, and by myself. It was a place of peace, where I could give myself to the poets I treasured, and the great historians, and my own dreams of adding something to literature.

My poems to Sotur, written with my heart's blood, were stiff and stupid. I knew I was no poet, though I loved both poetry and history—the arts that brought some clarity, some hope of meaning, to human emotions and the senseless, cruel record of human wars and governments. History would be my art. I knew I had a lot to learn, but learning was a delight to me. I had grand plans of books I would write. My life's work, I decided, would be to combine the annals of the various City States into one grand history; thus, incidentally, I would become a grand and famous historian. I made outlines of such a synthesis, ignorant, overambitious, full of errors, but not entirely foolish.

My great fear was that someone had already written my history of the City States and that I didn't know it, because Everra wouldn't buy any new

books.

One morning in early spring he sent me across town to Belmand, a household known as ours was for its books and learning. I liked going there. The teacher, Mimen, a younger man than Everra, was his closest friend. They were always exchanging books and manuscripts, often with me as messenger. I was delighted to be excused from hearing little children drone out their alphabet, to get out of the house into the sunlight of morning. I took the long way round, through the sycamore grove where Torm used to drill us, south along the streets under the city walls, loitering along and enjoying my freedom all the way. At Belmand, Mimen made me welcome. He liked me, and had often talked to me about the works of some modern writers, reciting me poetry by Rettaca, Caspro, and others, whose names Everra wouldn't even say. Mimen never lent me their books, knowing Everra had forbidden me to read them. This day we talked a little, but only of the rumor of war with Morva. Both Yaven and a son of the Bel Family were with the army there. Mimen had to return to his schoolroom, so he gave me an armload of books, and I set off home.

I went directly across town this time, because the books were heavy. I was just crossing Long Street when I heard shouting. Looking down the street towards the River Gate I saw smoke—a house afire—or more than one house, for the clouds of smoke billowed up higher every moment. People now were rushing past me across the square behind the Forefathers' Shrine, some running from the fire, some towards it; those who ran towards it were city guards, and as they ran they drew their swords. I stood and saw, as I had seen before, a troop of soldiers coming up Long Street, mounted and afoot, under a green banner. The soldiers and the city guards met and fought with a shouting and clashing of arms. I could not move until I saw the riderless horse break from that knot and muddle of fighting men and gallop up the street straight at me, lathered with white sweat streaked red, blood running from where its eye should be. The horse screamed, and then I could move.

I dodged and ran across the square, between the Shrine and the Senate House, by the back streets, to Arcamand. I burst into the slaves' door shouting, "Invasion! Enemy soldiers inside the city!"

It was news to the household, for Arcamand is set apart by the quiet squares and broad streets of its neighborhood. There was great panic and

dismay as the word spread. Elsewhere in Etra word of the incursion had got about much faster, and probably by the time Ennumer had stopped shrieking, the city guards and off-duty soldiers and citizens had driven the invaders back out the River Gate.

Cavalrymen from a troop quartered near the Cattle Market went in pursuit of them and caught a few stragglers east of the bridge, but the main body of the enemy got away. None of our soldiers had been killed, though several had been wounded. No damage had been done except the firing of several thatch-roofed storage sheds near the Gate; but the shock to the city was tremendous. How had troops from Casicar been able to approach Etra in broad daylight, let alone ride right in through the River Gate? Was this impudent foray merely the signal of a full-scale assault from Casicar, for which we were utterly unprepared? The incredulous shame, the rage, and the fear we all felt that first day were uncontrollable. I saw the Father, Altan Arca, weep as he spoke to Torm, giving orders for the defense of the house before he left for an emergency meeting of the Senate.

My heart swelled with the wish to help my Family, my people, to be useful, to stand against the enemies of Etra. I helped collect all the children in the dormitory with Iemmer, and then waited in the schoolroom for orders as to what we house people could do. I wanted very much to be with Sallo, but she was shut up in the silk rooms, where male slaves could not come. Everra, grey and shaken, sat reading in silence; I paced up and down the room. There was a long, strange silence in the great house. Hours passed.

Torm came by the door of the schoolroom and seeing me, stopped. “What are you doing here?”

“Waiting to know how we may be of use, Torm-dí,” Everra said, getting up hastily.

Torm shouted to someone, “Two more here,” then strode on without a word to Everra.

Two young men came in and told us to follow them. They were wearing swords and so must be noblemen, though we did not know them. They took us across the back court to the barrack. The barrack doors had a great outside bolt across them, which I had never seen closed before. The two young men slid it aside and ordered us in. We heard the bolt slam to behind us.

All the male slaves of Arcamand were there, locked up in the barrack. Even the body servants of the Father, who slept in his anteroom, were there, even the stablemen and Sem the head hostler, who lived and slept in the mews over the stables. It was terribly crowded, for with their various duties day and night not more than half the men would normally be in the barrack, and then only to change clothes or sleep. There were not nearly enough bunks for this crowd, hardly room even to sit down. Many were afoot, talking, excited and disturbed. It was quite dark, because not only were the doors locked but the windows had been shuttered. The close air stank of sweat and bedding.

My teacher stood bewildered just inside the doors. I got him to come with me to his room, a little cubicle partitioned off from the main dormitory; there were four such cubicles reserved for the older and most highly favored slaves. Three stablemen were sitting on Everra's cot, but Sem ordered them off—"That's the Teacher's room, you stinking sons of horse dung! Get out of there!"

I thanked Sem, for Everra seemed almost stunned, unable to speak. I got him to sit down on his cot, and he was finally able to tell me that he was all right. I left him there and went to listen to what the other men were saying. When we first came in I heard angry voices, indignant protests, but these died down as some of the older men told the younger ones that this was nothing unusual, they weren't being punished; it simply was the rule when there was threat of an attack on the city: all male slaves were locked away—"Out of danger," said old Fell.

"Out of danger!" said a valet. "What if the enemy gets in again and sets fires? We'll roast here like pies in an oven!"

"Shut your fool trap," somebody told him.

"Who's looking after our horses?" said a stable hand.

"Why can't they trust us? What did we ever do but work for 'em?"

"Why should they trust us when they treat us like this?"

"I want to know who's looking after our horses."

It went on like that, on and off, all day. Some of the younger boys were my pupils. They tended to gather around me, out of habit I suppose. In the desperation of boredom I said at last, "Come on, we might as well do our lesson. Pepa! Start off *The Bridge on the Nisas*!" They'd been learning that fine singsong ballad, and they liked it. Pepa, a good student, was too shy to

start reciting among all these grown men, but I started off—“ ‘Beneath the walls of Etra’—come on, Pepa!” He joined in, and pretty soon the boys were passing the stanzas around, one to the next, just as if we were in the schoolroom. Ralli piped out bravely in his thin little voice,

Are we then men of Morva
To flee before the foe,
Or shall we fight for Etra
Like our fathers long ago?

And I realised that around us the men had fallen silent and were listening. Some remembered their own schooling, others were hearing the words, the story, for the first time. And they heard it without irony, simply stirred by the events and the call to patriotic courage. When one of the boys faltered, a couple of men picked up the verse which they’d learned long ago in Everra’s schoolroom or maybe from the teacher before him, and passed it round to the next boy. At the rousing climax there was a cheer, and congratulations to the boys, and the first laughter we’d heard all day. “Good stuff, that,” said Sem. “Let’s have some more!” I saw Everra standing at the entrance to his cubicle, looking frail and grey, but listening.

We said them another of Ferrio’s ballads, and they liked it well enough—almost all of them were listening by now—but *The Bridge on the Nisas* remained the favorite by far. “Let’s have that Bridge again,” some man would say, and get a boy to start off, “ ‘Beneath the walls of Etra . . .’ ” By the end of the day in the barrack many of them had learned the whole thing, with the quickness of memory that we often lose with literacy, and could roar it out in unison.

Sometimes they added verses that would have made Ferrio’s hair stand on end. They got scolded by other men—“Hey, keep it decent, there’s kids here.” And they begged pardon of Everra, for whom most of them had an ungrudging, protective respect. The teacher was one of them and yet not one of them: a slave of value, a learned man, who knew more than most nobles knew. They were proud of him. As order began to be established in the crowded barrack, certain men came to the fore—Sem and Metter chief among them—as the keepers of order and the decision makers. Everra was consulted, but mostly set apart and looked after. And I was fortunate in

being his disciple, since I got to sleep on the floor of his cubicle, not in the terrible crowding of the main room and the stink of the walled privies behind it.

The worst thing about those days, for most of us, was being kept in ignorance of what was going on, the city's fate, our fate. Food was prepared and brought to us by women slaves from the kitchen. The women were received, twice daily, when the bolt was shot back and the doors briefly opened, with roars of greeting and indecent proposals, and assailed with questions—Are we fighting? Did Casicar attack? Are they in the city? and so on—to most of which they had no answers, though they had plenty of hearsay. Then the women were herded back to the house, and while we ate, the men would chew over those scraps and rumors along with the bread and meat, and try to work out some sense from them. They generally agreed that there had been fighting outside the walls, probably at the River Gate, and that the attackers had not broken into the city, but had not yet been driven off entirely.

And when, on the fourth day, we were at last released, that proved to be the case. Troops in training, hastily brought up from south of the city, had joined the cavalry troop that had been nearby, and beat back the attackers. The cavalry was now pursuing the Casicarans across country. The city guard had been able to retire within the walls and man them against forays. Casicar had brought no siege engines, counting on a surprise mass assault on the gate to get them into the city. If one of their captains, hungry for glory, hadn't led his troop to make that premature raid, we would have had little or no warning, and the city might have been taken and burnt.

And we locked in the barrack . . . But there was no use thinking about that. We'd been released, and the joy of release was tremendous, it made up for everything.

All of us who could ran out that night to cheer the first troops returning across the Nisas. My sister sneaked out of the silk rooms to meet me and, dressed as a boy, went with me to the River Gate to cheer. It was a crazy thing to do, for a gift-girl who went out in the streets could be horribly punished; but there was a sense of joyous license that night, and we rode on the flood of it. We cheered the troops with all our heart and soul. Among them, in the wild torchlight, we saw Torm, marching along with his odd gait, swinging his arms, short and grim and soldierly. Sallo looked

down at once to hide her face, for it wouldn’t do if Torm saw his brother’s gift-girl out on the loose. She and I slipped back to Arcamand after that, laughing and breathless, through the quiet dark streets and courts of our dear city.

The next day we heard—from Sallo, who heard it from the Mother herself—that Yaven’s regiment was to be brought back to guard the city. Sallo was alight with joy. “He’s coming, he’s coming! I don’t care what happens so long as he’s here!” she said.

But that was the last good news we had for a while.

Knowing Etra’s armies were occupied with truce breakers from Morva and Osc, Casicar had sent that first wave of soldiers to make a lightning assault and take the city by surprise if they could. Repelled, they fell back at once, but only to the front lines of a whole army marching through the hills from Casicar, the great city on the Morr.

Etra was now fast filling up with farmers and country people fleeing from the invaders, some in panic, empty-handed, others bringing all they could in wagons and barrows and driving their cattle before them. But on the third day after our night of rejoicing, the gates were shut. Etra was surrounded by an enemy army.

From the walls we saw them methodically setting up camp, dragging up timbers, digging earthworks as their defense against our soldiers’ attack. They had come prepared for a long siege. They set up ornate tents for their officers, their wagon trains were loaded high with grain and fodder, they made great pens for the cattle and sheep they’d taken from farms along the way and would slaughter as they needed. We saw another city growing around ours, a city of swords.

We were sure at first that our armies in the south would sweep in and save us. That hope died hard. Weeks passed before we saw the first Etran troops come to harry the Casicarans and raid their ditch-and-wall defenses. We cheered them from the walls, and shot fire missiles into the tent-city to distract the enemy, but our men always had to fall back. They were small troops, outnumbered ten or twenty to one. Where were the strong regiments that had gone to drive the Morvans and Os-cans back to their own lands? What had happened in the south? Dire rumors ran through the city. There was no way to counter them, since we were cut off from all news.

On the first morning of the siege the Senate sent a deputation to the tower above the River Gate to call out for a parley, demanding the reasons for this unprovoked and undeclared attack. The Casicaran generals refused to make any answer, allowing their soldiers to shout and jeer at the Senators. One of the Senators was Altan Arca. I saw him when he came home, dark with fury and humiliation.

The next day the Senate named one of its members, Canoc Ereco Bahar, as Dictator, an ancient title revived in emergencies for a temporary supreme commander. New rules and ordinances immediately began to govern our lives. Strict control of food went into effect: supplies were gathered from all households into the great market warehouses and shared out with ritual punctuality and exactness; hoarders were hanged in the square before the Shrine of the Forefathers. All male citizens over twelve and under eighty years of age were conscripted into defense forces commanded by the city guard. As for slaves, when the siege began, many houses locked up all their male slaves again. The Father of Arcamand merely restricted us to the house and its grounds at night, keeping a strict curfew; and the same policy was soon ordered by the Dictator. Obviously male slaves were needed to do the work of the city, and were worse than useless if shut up like calves being fattened. Bahar decreed that though slaves remained their masters' property, they were also at the disposal of the City of Etra during the emergency. He and the other Senators could order work parties from any house to join the civic workforce in the city barrack. A slave ordered to a work party lived there for the duration of the job, under the command of the veteran General Haster.

I was sent there for the first time in June, about two months into the siege. I was glad to go, to be of use to my city, my people. The schoolroom seemed to me shameful in its peaceable detachment from daily fears and concerns. I longed to get away from the little children and join the men. I was in high spirits, as were most of us at Arcamand and in the city as a whole. We had survived the first shock and terror and found we could live under stern conditions, on a minimum of food, among endless alarms, trapped by an enemy bent on destroying us by sword or fire or starvation. We could not only live, we could live well, in hope and comradeship.

Sallo came to see me the evening before I left for the civic barrack. She was several months pregnant, her eyes bright, her brown skin radiant,

almost luminous. Though of course we had received no word of Yaven, she had made up her mind that if he came to any harm she would know it. She was certain that all was well with him. “You remember things,” she said to me, smiling, hugging me as we sat side by side on the school bench, as we had when we were children. “You remembered the start of this war, the first raid, didn’t you? You saw it. I don’t see things. But I know things. And I know I know them. Like Gammy always said: We Marsh people, we have our powers . . .” She laughed and rocked me sideways, bumping me with her hip.

“Oh, Sal,” I said, “did you ever think you’d like to go there, to the Marshes, to see where we came from?”

“No,” she said, laughing again. “I just want to be here, with Yaven-dí home, and no siege, and lots to eat! . . . But you, maybe they’ll let you travel, when the siege is over, when you’re a scholar—they’ll let you go buy books, like Mimen did, he went to Pagadi, didn’t he? You can travel all over the Western Shore, you can go to the Marshes . . . And everybody there will have a big nose just like yours.” She stroked my nose. “Like storks. My Beaky. You’ll see!”

Sotur also came by before I left. I was tongue-tied with her. She put a small leather purse in my hand: “It might be useful. We’ll be free soon, Gavir!” she said, smiling.

The freeing of the city meant freedom to all of us in Arcamand, even if we were slaves.

I found a different mood in the civic barrack. I found a very different life there. I soon understood how childishly foolish my eagerness to go there had been. Nothing in my life in Arcamand had prepared me for the heavy work and the brutal life of a civic slave. The gang I was put in had the job of taking down an old storage building and carrying the building stones to the West Gate for use in repairs to the tower and wall. The stones were massive, weighing a half ton or so. The work required skills which nobody in the group had and tools which we had to improvise. We worked from dawn till night. We lived on the same rations we had received at Arcamand, which were adequate for that life, not for this one. Our gang boss, Cot, was a man whose only qualifications were great strength and indifference to pain. Cot’s chief, Haster’s assistant for this division of the slaves, was Hoby.

Hoby was the first person I saw when I came to the civic barrack. He had grown powerfully muscular. His head was shaven, which made his likeness to the Father and Torm less apparent. But there was the scar that split his eyebrow, and his old truculent look. I was about to speak to him when he looked at me directly, a stare of contemptuous hatred, and turned away.

He never spoke to me for the two months I lived in the civic barrack. It was he who put me on the rock gang, as we were called. He made my life hard in other ways, which he had the power to do. The other men saw that, and some mistreated me in order to curry favor with Hoby, while others did what they could to protect me from him. They asked me what "the Chief" had against me, and I answered that I didn't know, except that he blamed me for his scar.

Haster demanded that we bank any money we had with him, for there were men in the barrack who'd kill you for a penny if they knew you had it. I hated to part with the ten bronze eagles in the leather purse, Sotur's gift, and the only money of my own I had ever had. Haster was honest, by his lights, keeping a fifth of whatever he held for you, but doling out the rest in small change on demand. There was a thriving black market in food, which I'd known nothing about at Arcamand, and I soon learned where to go to get cracked grain or dried meat to fill my empty belly, and which extortioner gave you the best value for your pennies.

My money gave out before my time was up, and the last half month on the rock gang was the worst. I don't remember it very clearly, partly because hunger and exhaustion put me in a condition where the visions, the rememberings, came on me more and more often, so that sometimes I went from one to another, from the place of the silky blue waters to a stinking bed where I lay gazing up at a roof of dark rock just above my face, then I was standing at a window looking at a white mountain across a shining strait, and then all at once I was back straining to hoist or haul great stones in the summer heat. It was often the fiery sting of Cot's whip on my ribs that brought me back. "Wake up, you staring fool!" he'd shout, and I'd try to understand where I was and what I should be doing, while my workmates cursed me for slacking, letting them down, sometimes putting them in danger. I learned later that Cot had asked Hoby to take me

off his crew weeks before. Hoby refused. At last Cot went over his head to Haster, who said, “He’s useless, send him home.”

When I was released, it took me an hour to cross the city. I had to sit down at every corner and in every square to catch my breath and gather strength and try to push away the rememberings, the voices and strange lights and faces that filled my head. Through the branches of a forest I saw the fountain and the broad facade of Arcamand across the sunlit square. Through the darkness of a reeking cave I crossed the square, and went round to the slaves’ door, and knocked. Ennumer opened the door. “We haven’t anything to give you,” she said sharply. I couldn’t speak. She recognised me and burst into tears.

I was taken to the infirmary and put to bed. Old Remen rubbed comfrey salve on my whip cuts and gave me catnip tea; my sister came to hug me, stroke my hair, croon and cry and tease me and sit beside the bed. I remembered how the Mother had come when I was there before, and the memory was so clear it was like the rememberings. I spoke to her, thanking her. “I’m so glad to be home!” I said.

“Of course you are. Now go to sleep,” Sallo said in her husky soft voice. “And when you wake up you’ll still be home, dear Beaky, dear Gav!” And so I slept.

As soon as I recovered—and rest and food, though the food was in woefully short supply by now, were all I needed—I went back to the schoolroom and took up my duties with Everra as if I’d never been away.

When in August I was called to another civic work crew, Everra was so distressed that he went to the Father and protested. He came back to me and said, “The House of Arca is blessed indeed, Gavir. It cares for its children even in the days of war and famine. The Father explained to me that you won’t be under Haster’s command, nor live in that barrack. The men you’ll work with are all educated slaves. The task is to move the sacred prophecies and annals of the Ancients from the old repository under the west wall to the vaults of the Shrine of the Forefathers, where they’ll be safe from fire and water and can be hidden in case of invasion. The College of Priests of the Shrine needs literate and intelligent slaves for the task, which must be done with due precaution and in accordance with the rituals of the Ancestors. It will take care, but will not be heavy work. It is an honor to our House that you’ve been chosen.” He clearly took it as an

honor to himself, too, and was, I think, a little envious of me, longing to see those ancient documents with his own eyes.

I was glad enough to quit my schoolroom duties for a while, though apprehensive, especially about food. By now we all thought all the time about food. Arcamand had no hoarded supplies, and the city supply of everything but grain was now almost exhausted. The Father and Mother set an example of patient abstinence, and by rigorous supervision of the kitchens whatever food the household got was at least shared out with justice among us all. I dreaded going back to favoritism, unfairness, and bitter rivalry over rations, the cheating and sharp dealing of the black marketeers. But I went as ordered to the slave quarters of the College of the Priests of the Forefathers' Shrine, and when the first meal I had there was a rich chicken broth with succulent barley, such as I hadn't tasted for months, I knew I was in luck.

The half dozen slaves of the Shrine were all older men, so the priests had asked for assistants from Houses such as Arca, Erre, and Bel, where some slaves were educated. Mimen, Everra's friend from Belmand, was there, and I was very glad to see him. He had brought three younger men with him, his students. The men from Erremand, both in their forties, were called Tadder and Ienter. I had heard Everra speak of them with grudging, suspicious admiration—"very learned men," he said, "very learned, but not sound, not sound." I knew he meant they read "the moderns"—books written in the last century or two. I was right. When we went to the dormitory that night—and it was crowded, with thirteen men sleeping where six had slept, but warm, well lighted, and as comfortable as one could hope—the first thing I saw by one bedside was a copy of the *Cosmologies* of Orrec Caspro. Everra had spoken of this poem once or twice the way a doctor might speak of a ghastly, deadly, infectious disease.

Tadder, a dry-faced man with keen eyes under heavy black brows, saw my glance. "Have you read it, laddy?" he asked. He had a northern accent, and some unfamiliar turns of speech.

I shook my head.

"Take it then," said Tadder, and held it out to me. "Have a look!"

I didn't know what to do. I couldn't help glancing at Mimen, as if he might report me to Everra for even looking at the book.

“Everra hasn’t let him read the new poets, you know,” Mimen said to Tadder. “Or anybody since Trudec. Is Caspro a bit much to start with?”

“Not at all,” said the northerner. “What are you, laddy, fourteen, fifteen? The very age to follow Caspro to glory. Here, d’ye know his song, then?” And he sang out in a fine, pure tenor, “ ‘As in the dark of winter night—’ ”

“Hey, hey there,” said the other man from Erremand, Ienter, “don’t get us in hot water the first night, brother!”

“Is that Caspro’s hymn, then?” asked the priests’ senior slave, a soft-spoken old man with an unassuming air of authority. “I have never heard it sung.”

“Well, there’s places one gets hanged for singing it, Reba-dí,” Ienter said with a smile.

“Not here,” Reba said. “Go on, please. I’d like to hear it.”

Tadder and Ienter exchanged glances, and then Tadder sang—

As in the dark of winter night
The eyes seek dawn,
As in the bonds of bitter cold
The heart craves sun,
So blinded and so bound, the soul
Cries out to thee:
Be our light, our fire, our life,
    Liberty!

The beauty of his voice and the sweet, sudden leap of the tune on that last word brought tears into my eyes.

Ienter saw it and said, “Ah, look what you’ve done to the boy, Tadder. Corrupted him with a single verse!”

Mimen laughed. “Everra will never forgive me,” he said.

“Sing it again, Tadder-dí,” one of Mimen’s students asked, with a glance at Reba for permission; Reba nodded; and this time several voices joined in the singing. And I realised then that I’d heard the tune, fragments of it, in the civic barrack, now and then, whistled, a few notes, like a signal.

“Enough,” the senior slave said in his quiet voice, “we don’t want to wake our masters.”

“Oh, no, surely not,” said Tadder. “We don’t want to do that.”

Chapter 6

WORKING WITH those men was as pleasant as working on the rock gang had been miserable. The labor was heavy at times, lifting and carrying massive chests and strongboxes full of documents, but we used intelligence to plan the work instead of rushing at it with impatient brutality, and we were patient with one another, too. The work was shared fairly, and rather than whipping and shouted orders there was joking and conversation—sometimes about the ancient scrolls and records we were handling, sometimes about the siege, the latest attack or fire, or anything under the sun. It was an education in itself to work with these men. I knew that. But I was deeply troubled by much they said.

While we were with Reba and the others our talk was harmless, but most of the day the priests and their slaves were busy with their ritual duties at the Shrine and the Senate, and having seen he could trust us to do the work with scrupulous care, Reba left us unsupervised. So while we were in the old repository under the west wall, figuring out what we had to deal with, how to move the decaying boxes and fragile scrolls without damaging them, we were on our own, seven slaves in an ancient, thick-walled temple, nobody to hear us. There Mimen, Tadder, and Ienter talked as I had never heard men talk. Now I understood why Everra spoke of the modern writers as evil influences. My companions were always quoting Denios, Caspro, Rettaca, and other “new poets” and philosophers I’d never heard of, and everything they quoted, though much of the poetry was beautiful beyond any I knew, seemed to be critical, destructive, full of fierce emotions—pain, anger, dissatisfied longing.

It confused me very much. The rock gang were brutal men but they would never question their place in the system, and would think it childish to ask why one man should have power and another none. As if fate and the gods cared for our questions and opinions, as if all the great structure

of society the Ancestors had left us could be changed at a whim! My companions here, more refined in their manners than many nobles, and honest and mild in daily life, were in their talk and thought shamelessly disloyal to their Houses and to Etra itself, our city under siege. They talked of their masters disrespectfully, contemptuous of their faults. They had no pride in the soldiers of their House. They speculated about the morals even of the Senators. Tadder and Ienter thought it possible that some Senators, secretly in league with Casicar, had deliberately sent most of the army south so that Casicar could take Etra.

I listened to days of this kind of talk without saying anything, but protest and anger grew in me. When Tadder, who was not even an Etran but came from north of Asion, began to talk about the fall of our city not as a disaster but as an opportunity, I couldn't stand it any longer. I burst out at him. I don't know what I said—I raged at him as faithless, traitorous, ready to destroy our city from within even as the enemy besieged the walls.

The other young men, Mimen's students, began to pour indignation and mockery onto me, but Tadder stopped them. "Gavir," he said, "I'm sorry to have offended you. I respect your loyalty. I ask you to consider that I too am loyal, though not to the House that bought me or the city that uses me. My loyalty is to my own people, my own kind. And however I may talk, never think that I'd urge any slave to rebel! I know where that leads."

Taken aback by his apology and his earnestness, embarrassed by my own outburst, I subsided. We went on with our work. For a while Mimen's students shunned and snubbed me, but the older men treated me just as before. The next day, when Ienter and I were taking a coffer to the Shrine in a little handcart we had devised to carry the fragile relics, he briefly told me Tadder's history. Born free in a northern village, he had been captured as a boy by raiders and sold to a household in the great city of Asion, where he was educated. When he was twenty, there had been a slave revolt in Asion. It was savagely repressed: hundreds of men and women slaves had been slaughtered, and every suspect branded— "You've seen his arms," Ienter said.

I had seen the terrible ridged scars, and thought they were from a fire, an accident.

“When he says his own people,” Ienter told me, “he doesn’t mean a tribe or a town or a household. He means you and me.”

It made little sense to me, for I couldn’t yet conceive of a community greater than the walls of Etra, but I accepted it as a fact.

Mimen’s students continued to ignore me most of the time, but without malice. I was much younger than the youngest of them, in their eyes a half-educated boy. At least they trusted me not to betray them by reporting seditious conversations, for they talked freely in my presence. And though I was shocked by much they said, and silently despised them as hypocrites who feigned loyalty to masters they hated, I found myself listening, just as I had listened, disgusted, repelled, but fascinated, to the sexual talk of some of the men in the barrack at home.

Anso, the eldest of Mimen’s students, liked to tell about the “Barnavites,” a band of escaped slaves living somewhere in the great forests northeast of Etra. Under the leadership of a man named Barna, a man of immense stature and strength, they had formed a state of their own —a republic, in which all men were equal, all free. Each man had a vote, and could be elected to the government, and diselected too, if he misgoverned. All work was done by all, and all goods and game shared in common. They lived by hunting and fishing and by raiding rich people’s chariots and the traders’ convoys that went to and from Asion. Villagers and farmers in the whole region supported them and refused to betray them to the governments of Casicar and Asion; for the Barnavites generously shared their loot and bounty with their neighbors in those lonely districts, who, if not slaves, were bondsmen or freedmen living in dire poverty.

Anso drew a lively picture of the Barnavites’ life in the forests, answerable to no master or senator or king, bound only by freely given allegiance to their community. He knew stories of their daring attacks on guarded wagon convoys on the roads and merchant ships on the Rassy, and the clever disguises they used to go into towns, even into Casicar and Asion, to trade their loot for things they needed in the market. They never killed but in self-defense, Anso said, or, if a man came upon their hidden realm deep in the forest, then he must either pledge his life to live as a free man with them, or die. They never took from the poor, and even from rich farms took only the harvest, never the seed grain. And the women of the

farms and villages didn't fear them, for a woman was welcome among them only if she joined them of her own free will.

Tadder read a book or left the room when Anso got launched on these stories. Once or twice he burst out, calling the Barnavites a mere band of thieving runaways. His scorn for them made me wonder if they had something to do with the slave revolt for which he and other slaves in Asion had suffered. Ienter derided the stories more mildly as impossible romances. I agreed with him, for the idea that a band of slaves could live as if they were masters, turning the age-old, sacred order upside down, could only be a daydream; but still I liked to hear these idylls of forest liberty.

For the words liberty, freedom, had come to have a presence, a radiance in my mind, dominating it, like the great, bright stars I used to see on summer nights in Vente, and which I often looked up to see, fainter and farther, from the dark city. We were at leisure, evenings in the dormitory, and the priests allowed us oil for our lamps. I read Denios' *Transformations*, which Tadder lent me, and that was a great discovery to me. It was like that dream I had had of finding rooms in a house that I had not known were there, where I was made welcome among wonders, and greeted by a golden animal. Denios—the greatest of poets, all my companions said—had been born a slave. In his poems he used the word liberty with a tenderness, a reverence, that made me think of my sister when she spoke of her beloved. And Mimen had a battered little pocket manuscript of Caspro's *Cosmologies*, which he said went with him everywhere; he encouraged me to read it. I found the poem disturbing and strange and understood very little of it, but sometimes a line would take me by the heart, the way his song had, that first night.

I was allowed to run across the city to see my sister for an hour. It was hot September weather. Sallo did not look very well, her body and legs swollen with her pregnancy, her face drawn and tired. She hugged me and asked all about the priests and the other slaves and our work, and I talked the whole time, and then had to run back to the Shrine.

A few days later Everra sent word to me that Sallo's child had been born at seven months and had lived only an hour.

We could not bury in the slave cemetery by the river, for it was outside the walls. During the siege, the bodies of slaves who died were burned in

the fire towers, as if they were citizens. Their ashes mingled with those of free men in the waters of the Ash Brook, which rose by the fire towers and ran out through a narrow pipe under the walls to join the Nisas, and then the Morr, and then the sea.

I stood in the autumn dawn at the fire towers by the brook with a few of the people of Arcamand. Sallo was not well enough yet to come to the baby's funeral, but Iemmer said she was in no danger. I was allowed to go see her after a few days. She was thin and tired-looking, and she wept when she hugged me. She said, in her soft tired voice, "If he'd lived, you know, they'd have traded him as soon as they could. If they could. I heard that one House traded a slave baby for a pound of meal. Nobody wants a new mouth in a siege. I think he knew it, Gav. Nobody really wanted him to be alive. Not even me. What . . ." She didn't finish her question, but opened her hands in a small, desolate gesture that said, What could he have been to me or I to him?

I was shocked at how my people at Arcamand looked. They were all bone-thin, with the same weary look Sallo had—the siege face. Visiting the schoolroom I found my young pupils pitifully skinny and listless. Children are the first to die in famine. We at the Shrine were eating twice as well as most people in the city. Sallo was delighted to see my good health, and wanted me to tell her about the food we got, the priests' fishpond, their carefully guarded flock of chickens that gave us eggs and now and then a bit of meat or a soup, their garden of holy herbs which included a good many lay vegetables, the gifts of grain to the Ancestors which fed the descendants of the Ancestors. . . . I was ashamed to talk about it, but she said, "I love to hear about it! Do the priests have olives? Oh, I miss olives more than anything!" So I told her we had olives sometimes, though in fact I hadn't tasted one for months.

I saw Sotur just before I left. She too looked listless, her beautiful hair gone dry and dull. She greeted me gently and I said, without knowing I was going to say it, "Sotur-ío, will you give me a quarter-bronze? I want to buy Sallo some olives."

"Oh, Gav, there haven't been any olives for months," she said.

"I know where to get them."

She looked at me with big eyes. After a moment she nodded. She went off and came back with a coin, which she pressed into my hand. "I wish

there was more I could do," she said. So she made my first begging an easy thing.

For a quarter-bronze, which would have bought a pound of them last year, the black marketer gave me ten wizened olives. I ran back with them to Arcamand and gave them to Iemmer for Sallo, who was in the silk rooms. I was long overdue getting back to the College of Priests, but Reba didn't say anything, perhaps because he saw I was in tears.

Reba was a gentle man with a serene mind. Sometimes he talked a little with me, telling me about the worship of the Ancestors in the Shrine, which was carried out as much by the priests' slaves as by the priests. He made me feel the dignity of that life and the peaceful beauty of the ever-repeated round of rites and prayers, on which the welfare, the very being, of the city depended. I think he saw the possibility that I might be given by my House to the College, and it flattered me that he wanted me. I could imagine living there as a priest of the Shrine. But I didn't want to live anywhere but Arcamand, near my sister, or do anything but what I had been brought up all my life to do—to learn so that I could teach the children of my House.

We were drawing near the end of our job. The ancient documents had been moved to the vaults under the Forefathers' Shrine, and all we had to do now was sort and store them—work which in fact could be drawn out almost indefinitely, for many of these old scrolls and annals were unidentified, and ought to be read and labeled and listed, as well as cleaned, preserved from insects, and given proper storage. Our Houses weren't eager to have us back, we were only extra mouths in a famine; and the priests and their slaves were glad to have us do the work. In fact, they couldn't have done it without us. I'd been surprised to discover that all seven of us, even I, were much better educated than the priests of the College. They knew the ancestral rites, but very little history or anything else, not even the history of the rites. We were finding all kinds of interesting documents, lives of great men of Etra from the earliest days, prophecies, records of civil and foreign wars and alliances with other cities—all of which fascinated me, drawing me back to my dream of writing a history of all the City States. I was content to be burrowing among the old scrolls and parchments down in the silent vaults, under the silent, dying city.

“What a comfort the past is,” Mimen said, “when the future offers none.”

Burning the bodies of those who died of starvation went on night and day now down by the Ash Brook. The smoke of the pyres rose and mixed with the mists of autumn and made a pall over the roofs. Sometimes the smell was the smell of burnt roasting meat and my mouth would water with hunger and sick revulsion.

Outside the north walls the enemy was preparing a huge earthen ramp on which they could bring their siege engines right up to the parapet. The city guardsmen threw paving stones down among the workers, but they swarmed like ants, and their archers shot at any man who showed himself along the walls. Our archers saved those arrows pulled from dying men, and made their own from any tree within the walls, even the old sycamores.

Unrest ran through the Senate and was shouted in the squares by orators: Why had Etra been so unprepared for attack—without weapons stockpiled, without sufficient food stored, her armies far away? Were there traitors among the Senators—lovers of Casicar? Men said the Senate refused to open the gates because they wanted Etra to starve, to die, before it was surrendered. To some this was noble and courageous, to others a vile betrayal. Rumors of unfair distribution of food now ran wild, true or not. Black marketers whose supplies ran out were murdered on the suspicion of withholding food. A merchant’s house was attacked and torn down by a mob who believed he was hoarding. They found nothing but a half barrel of dried figs hidden in the slaves’ barrack. There were constant stories of grain being hidden under the Senate House . . . under the Shrine of the Forefathers . . . That came too close to home. The priests of the College went in terror for their fishpond, their garden, their poultry, their lives. They begged for guards to be set around the Shrine, and ten men were put on duty. They couldn’t have done much if a mob had stormed the Shrine, but its sanctity still defended it, and us.

It was mid-October. Life hung in a kind of dead lull which we all felt preceded the end. Within a few days, either the assault on the north wall would begin and would be successful, or a mob out of control would open one of the gates, trying to escape before the slaughter and the burning. Or,

conceivably, the Senate would vote to surrender the city in hopes of avoiding total destruction.

And then the thing we had lost all hope of happened.

At daybreak, fog and smoke hanging heavy in the streets, over the enemy camp, along the Nisas, there came a sound of alarms, shouting, bugles signaling, the neighing of horses, the clash of arms. The armies of Etra had come home at last.

All morning we heard the noise of battle outside the walls, and those allowed on the walls and roofs could watch it. We slaves were locked into the compound of the Shrine, and could only beg for news from those who ran past the gates. Late in the morning a great troop of city guards marched through the square, stopping before the Shrine for the blessing of the Ancestors. They were all afoot—every horse in the city had been slaughtered for food long since—and there was a poor, lank look about them, their arms, their clothes, their gaunt faces, as if they were beggars pretending to be soldiers, or were the ghosts of soldiers. But the Ancestors blessed them through the priests' voices, and they marched on down Long Street to the River Gate. They marched in silence, no sound but the rhythmic clink of their weapons. Then for the first time in six months the gate was flung open, and the Etran guard burst forth in a sortie, surprising the besiegers from the rear as they faced our armies. This much we heard as people shouted word from roof to roof, and then we heard a great roar and shouts of victory. "We've got the bridge!" the watchers shouted. "Etra has taken the bridge!"

The rest of the day, though there were alarms and setbacks, was a long turn of the tide, the Casicarans giving way under Etran assaults, trying to regroup, getting knocked apart again, seeking ways to retreat and finding them blocked, until by evening the whole besieging army had become a horde of scattered men running for their lives through all the country between Etra and the Morr and the farmlands across the Nisas, chased by our mounted troops, hunted, cut down—the pig hunt, it was called later. Outside the walls, corpses were strewn thick over the earthworks and through the ravaged camp, thousands of dead men, many already naked, stripped of arms and clothing by our soldiers. The Nisas was dammed in places by dead bodies.

We were released after sunset. I went up on the parapet by the North Gate and saw the live men moving among the corpses, heaving them about like dead sheep to get at their armor and weapons, sometimes slashing a throat if the man seemed not certainly dead. Soon a call went out for slaves to bring the Etran dead into the city to our pyres by the Ash Brook. We seven were sent on that duty, and worked all night by moonlight and torchlight carrying corpses. It was an unearthly business. What I chiefly remember of it was that each time Anso and I, working together, laid a body down in the burning-grounds, I thought of Sallo's baby, Yaven's son, my nephew, who had lived an hour in the starving city. And each time I asked Ennu to guide, not the soldier, but that tiny, unmade soul, into the fields of darkness and the fields of light.

Many of the bodies we carried were those of city guards. They had paid a high cost for their brave foray.

All that night there was a kind of feeble riot, as both citizens and slaves poured out the open gates to plunder the food stores of the Casicaran army, and the Etran soldiers posted to guard them gave way before the pleas and the press of starving people, many of whom they knew. Some soldiers even brought up supply wagons to bring grain into the city. People fought over the supplies, mobbing the grain carts. Order was established only when daylight came, and then only by the use of violence—whips, cudgels, swords. In the morning light I saw the horror on the soldiers' faces as they looked at their people, the men and women of their city, swarming over a rack of sheep carcasses like maggots on a dead rat.

Slaves were ordered to their owner's house by noon, on pain of death. So I left the Shrine of the Forefathers with only time to thank old Reba and to accept from Mimen his little handwritten copy of Caspro's poem.

"Don't let Everra see it," he said with his wry smile, and not knowing how to thank him I only stammered, "No, no, I won't . . ."

It was the first book I'd ever owned. It was the first thing I'd ever owned. I called what I wore my clothes, the desk I used in the schoolroom I called my desk, but in fact they were not mine, they were the property of the House of Arca, as I was. But this book, this was mine.

WHEN YAVEN CAME HOME he greeted the Father and Mother with suitable affection and decorum and headed straight for the silk rooms. It was wonderful to see how Sallo bloomed and shone, now that he was back. Yaven wasn't as thin as most city people were, but he'd been through hard times too, and was weathered and toughened and tired. He told us about the campaign, me and Sallo and Sotur and Astano and Oco, all back in the schoolroom with Everra, like the old days. . . . The forces of Morva had been reinforced by an army from Gallec, the Votusans and Oscans had joined them; Etra's army had been hard put to withstand attackers on so many fronts. There had been, Yaven thought, some mistakes, some confusion in command, but no betrayal. The Etrans could not come to the relief of their city till they defeated the enemies who would have followed them right to the walls. Then they came as fast as they could. They crossed the Morr at night, making a boat bridge, so as to take the besieging army by surprise from the east, the unexpected direction.

"But we had no real idea how hard it was for you here," he said. "I still can't imagine what it was like . . ." Astano showed him a piece of "famine bread" she had kept: a brownish wafer like a chip of wood, made from a little barley or wheat meal, sawdust, earth, and salt. "We had plenty of salt," she said. "All we needed was something to put it on."

Yaven smiled, but the grim lines were set in his face. "We'll make Casicar pay for this," he said.

"Oh," said Sotur, "pay . . . Are we merchants, then?"

"No, little cousin. We're soldiers."

"And the wives of soldiers, and the lovers and mothers and sisters and cousins of soldiers . . . And what is it Casicar will pay us?"

"It's how it is," Yaven said gently. His hand was on Sallo's hand, as they sat side by side on the schoolroom bench.

Everra spoke of the honor of the city, the insult to the power of the Ancestors, the vengeance due. Yaven listened to him with us, but said nothing more of such matters. Presently he asked me about my time at the Shrine, and the ancient documents that we had been rescuing. As I was telling him, I saw in his absorbed face the face of the boy who loved the epics and the ballads, who had led us to build Sentas on those summer afternoons. It came into my head to wonder what Yaven would make of the "new poets." Maybe someday, when he was Father of Arcamand and I was

the teacher in this classroom, I would give him *The Transformations* to read and he would discover that new world . . . but I couldn't quite imagine it. Still, the thought moved me to tell him how we'd recited *The Bridge on the Nisas* in the barrack, early in the siege, how all the men had roared it out together—"Beneath the walls of Etra"— We ended up, all of us in the schoolroom, reciting the ballads, with Yaven the lead voice; and some of my skinny little pupils crept in to listen, round-eyed and wondering at the tall soldier laughing as he declaimed, "Then fled the Morvan soldiers, the men of Morva ran . . ."

"Again and again," Sotur whispered. "And back and forth." She was not saying the poems with us. She looked wretched and bewildered. She saw me gazing at her with concern, and turned her head sharply away.

Those autumn weeks after the siege we enjoyed what may be the sweetest of all pleasures: relief from incessant, intense strain and fear. That relief, that release, is freedom made manifest. It lets the heart soar. A mood of lenience and kindness filled Arcamand. People were grateful to one another that they had survived together. They could laugh together, and they did.

Early in the winter, Torm came back to the House to live. He had been in the city all through the siege, but not at Arcamand. The Dictator had levied a special troop of cadets, soldiers invalided home, and veterans as an auxiliary to the city guard, doing sentry duty, manning the walls and gates, and serving as firemen and civic police. These men had done good service in defense and fighting fires and had at first been popular heroes, but their increasing role in punishing black marketers, hoarders, and suspected traitors had led people to fear their investigations and accuse them of using their power arbitrarily. They had been disbanded a few days after liberation, when the Dictator resigned, restoring full power to the Senate.

Torm was seventeen now but looked much older, carrying himself and behaving like a grown man, grim, self-contained, and silent.

He brought Hoby back to Arcamand with him. As his own reward for service, he had requested that Hoby be released from the civic workforce to serve as his bodyguard. Like Metter, the Father's bodyguard, Hoby slept outside his master's door. Though he still shaved his head, and was a bigger man than Torm, their resemblance was clear to see.

The occasion of Torm's return was Astano's betrothal ceremony. The Mother had not approved her marriage with Corric Beltomo Runda, but instead had chosen for her a relative of that House through the female line, Renin Beltomo Tarc. Tarcmand was an ancient though not a wealthy House, and Renin a promising young Senator; he was a good-looking fellow and a pleasant talker, though, according to Sallo, our principal informant, he didn't know anything—"not even Trudec! Maybe he knows politics."

Sotur said nothing about the betrothal to us. We saw little of her. It seemed she hadn't felt the release from fear as we did. She hadn't regained her weight and looks as we all were doing. She still had the siege face. When I found her in the library at the table with a book, she would greet me kindly but wouldn't talk much and very soon would slip away. My ache of desire for her was gone, turned to an ache of pity, with a tinge of impatience—why must she go on moping in these good days of freedom?

Everra was to deliver an address at the betrothal ceremony. He spent days getting all his quotations from the classics ready. In the benign mood of that autumn, I felt it mean and dishonorable to hide from my old teacher what I'd learned from Mimen and the others at the Shrine. I told him I'd read Denios and that Mimen had given me his copy of Caspro's *Cosmologies*. My teacher shook his head gravely, but didn't go into a tirade. That encouraged me to ask him how Denios' poems could corrupt a reader, since they were noble in both language and meaning.

"Discontent," Everra answered. "Noble words to teach you how to be unhappy. Such poets refuse the gifts of the Ancestors. Their work is a bottomless pit. Once you remove the firm foundation of belief on which all our lives are built, there is nothing. Only words! Gorgeous, empty words. You can't live on words, Gavir. Only belief gives life and peace. All morality is founded upon belief."

I tried to say what I thought I had glimpsed in Denios, a morality larger than the one we knew, but my ideas were mere gropings, and Everra demolished them with his certainty. "He teaches nothing but rebellion against what must be—refusal of truth. Young men like to play with rebellion, to play at disbelief. I know that. But you'll tire of that sick folly as you grow older, and come back to belief, the one foundation of the moral law."

It was a relief to hear the old certainties again. And he hadn't told me to stop reading Caspro. I did not read often in the *Cosmologies*, for it was difficult and seemed remote and strange to me; but sometimes lines from it or from Denios would come into my mind, unfolding their meaning or their beauty, as a beech leaf unfurls in spring.

I thought of one of those lines when I stood with all the household to watch Astano, wearing robes of white and silver, cross the great atrium to meet and welcome her husband-to-be: *She is a ship on a flowing of bright waters . . .*

Everra made his speech, bristling with classical quotations, so that everyone could be impressed by the learning of the House of Arca. The Mother of the House of Arca said the words that gave her daughter to the House of Tarc. The Mother of that House came forward to receive our Astano as the future Mother of Tarcmand. Then my little pupils sang a wedding song Sotur had rehearsed with them for weeks. And so it was done. Lyre players and drummers in the gallery tuned up, and the wellborn went to the great rooms to feast and dance. We house people had a feast too, and our own music and dancing in the back courtyard. It was cold and a little rainy, but we were ready to dance—and always ready to feast again.

Betrothed in winter, Astano was married on the day of the spring equinox. A month later Yaven was called back to his regiment.

Etra was mounting an invasion of Casicar. Votus, which had been part of the alliance with Morva against us, had come over to our side, fearing the power of Casicar and seeing a chance to cripple it while it was weakened by defeat. Etrans and Votusans together would invade and take or besiege the city of Casicar—a great city, sometimes our enemy, sometimes our ally. *Again and again, back and forth*, Sotur had said.

I saw Sallo the day Yaven left. She had been allowed to go down to the River Gate to see him and his troops march out to war amid the wild cheering of the people. She was not tearful. She had the same certain hope she had had for him all through the siege. "I think Luck listens to him," she said, with a smile, but seriously. "In battle, I mean. In war. Not here."

"Not here? What do you mean, Sal?"

We were in the library alone and could talk freely. Yet she hesitated for a long time. Finally she looked up at me and seeing I really had no idea what she meant, she said, "The Father was glad to see him go."

I protested.

“No, listen, truly, Gav!” She spoke very low, sitting close to me. “The Father hates Yaven-dí. He does! He’s jealous. Yaven will inherit Altan Arca’s power. His House. His seat in the Senate. And he’s beautiful, and tall, and kind, like his mother—he’s a Galleco, not an Arca. His father can’t bear to look at him, he’s so jealous of him. I’ve seen it! A hundred times!— Why do you think it’s Yaven, the elder son, the heir, who gets sent off again to war? While the younger son, who should be the soldier, who’s had all the fancy training to be a soldier, stays safe at home? With his *bodyguard*! The cowardly, pompous little adder!”

I had never in my life heard my good-natured, tender-hearted sister speak with such hatred. I was appalled, wordless.

“Torm will be groomed for the Senate, you’ll see,” she said. “Altan Arca hopes Yaven will be—will be killed—” Her soft, passionate voice broke on that word, and she gripped my hand hard. “He *hopes* it,” she repeated, in a whisper.

I wanted to refuse and refute everything she said, but still no words came to me.

Sotur came into the library. She stopped, seeing us, as if to withdraw. Sallo looked up at her and said in a plaintive whisper, “Oh, Sotur-ío!”—and Sotur came to her and took her in her arms, a thing I had never seen that reticent, shy, proud girl do with anyone. The two clung to each other as if trying to reassure each other and unable to. I sat in dumb wonder. I tried to believe that they were consoling each other for losing Yaven, but I knew it wasn’t that. It wasn’t grief I saw, or love. It was fear.

And when Sotur’s eyes met mine, over my sister’s head, there was a fierce indignation in her look, which softened gradually. Whatever enemy she had been seeing in me, she saw me again at last.

She said, “Oh, Gavir! If you could get Everra to ask for Sallo to help him teach the little ones—something—anything to get her out of the silk rooms! I know, you can’t, he can’t . . . I know! I asked for her as my maid. I asked the Mother—for my nameday present—just while Yaven is away—may I have Sallo? And she said no, it was not possible. I have never asked for anything. Oh, Sallo, Sallo—you must get sick! You must starve again! Get thin and ugly, like me!”

I didn’t understand.

Sotur couldn’t comprehend my incomprehension. Sallo did. She kissed Sotur’s cheek and turned to me and hugged me, saying, “Don’t worry, Gav. It’ll be all right, you’ll see!”

And she went off, back to the chambers of the well-born and the silk rooms, and I went back to the slave barrack, puzzled and worried, but always coming back to the belief, the sure belief, that the Father and Mother and Ancestors of our House would not let anything go really wrong.

PART TWO

Chapter 7

I AM LYING in the dark in a strange, strong-smelling bed. Not far above my face is a ceiling, a low vault of raw black rock. Beside me lies something warm, pressing heavily against my leg. It raises its head, a long, grey head, grim black lips, dark eyes that gaze across me: a dog, a wolf? I remembered this many times, remembered waking up with the dog or wolf pressed close beside me, lying among rank-smelling furs in the dark place with a rock ceiling, a cave it must be. I remember it now. I am lying there now. The dog gives a whining groan and gets up, steps over me. Someone speaks to it, then comes and crouches beside me and speaks to me, but I don't understand what he says. I don't know who he is, who I am. I can't lift my head. I can't lift my hand. I am weak, empty, nothing. I remember nothing.

I will tell you what happened in the order it happened, as historians do, but there is deep untruth in doing so. I did not live my life as history is written. My mind used to leap ahead, remembering what had not yet come to pass; now, what was past was lost to me. What I tell you now, it took me a long time to find again. Memory hid from me and buried itself in darkness, as I lay buried in that dark place, that cave.

It was early in the morning, in the first warmth of spring. The open inner courtyards of Arcamand were cheerful in the sunlight.

"Where's Sallo? Oh, Sallo and Ris both went off with Torm-dí, Gav."

"With Torm-dí?"

"Yes. He took them off to the Hot Wells. Last night, pretty late."

Falli was talking to me. Falli was the gate guard to the silk rooms. She sat in the western court with her spinning, a heavy, slow-spoken woman who had long ago been one of the Father's gift-girls. She made a reverence whenever she spoke of the Father or the Mother or any of the Family or any other wellborn family. She worshipped them as gods. People used to laugh at her for it—"Falli thinks they're already Ancestors," Iemmer said.

Falli was a foolish woman. What foolish thing had she just said, bobbing her head when she said “Torm-dí”—that Torm had taken Ris and my sister to the Hot Wells?

The Hot Wells belonged to Corric Runda, son of the Senator Granoc Runda, the wealthiest and most powerful man in the government of Etra. Corric had wanted to marry our Astano, and failed, but seemingly he held no grudge; lately he’d become Torm’s friend or patron. Torm was always with him and his circle of young, rich men. Young, rich men could live the high life, now that Etra was free and prosperous again—endless feasts, women, drinking parties that ended up as riots in the city streets . . . A strange friendship for Torm, it seemed to some of us, with his stiff grim ways and his warrior’s training, but Corric had taken a fancy to him, insisted on having him; and the Father approved of the friendship, encouraging it as a good thing for the Family, for the Arca interest with the House of Runda. Young men would be young men, there would be women and drinking and so on, there was no harm in it, nothing would go really wrong.

Tib, a prentice cook now, followed Hoby about like a dog when Hoby was at Arcamand. And Tib told us the stories Hoby told him. Corric and his friends liked to get Torm drunk because he went crazy when he was drunk and would do anything they dared him to do—fence with three men at once, fight a bear, tear off his clothes and dance naked on the Senate steps till he fell down in a foaming fit. They thought Torm was wonderful, Hoby said, they all admired him. To some of us it sounded as if they used him as a clown, for entertainment, like the dwarfs Corric kept as wrestlers, or his half-witted, one-eyed, giant bodyguard Hurn. But it wasn’t like that at all, according to Hoby as related by Tib. Hoby said that Corric Runda took lessons in swordfighting from Torm, treating him as a master of the art. He said all Corric’s friends respected Torm. They feared his great strength. They liked him to run wild because then everybody feared him and them.

“Torm-dí is young,” Everra said. “Let him have his fling while he’s young. He’ll be the wiser for it when he’s older. The Father knows that. He had his wild days too.”

The Runda estate called the Hot Wells was a mile or so from Etra in the rich grainlands west of the city. The Senator built a grand new house there

and gave it to his son Corric. Hoby told Tib all about it and Tib told us: the luxurious chambers, the silk rooms full of women, the courts full of flowers, and the wonderful bathing pool in a back court—the water came up from a hot spring and was always the temperature of blood, but it was transparent blue-green, and peacocks spread their plumage beside it on pavements of green and purple marble . . . Hoby had been there many times as Torm's bodyguard. All these young noblemen had bodyguards, it was the fashion; Corric had three besides the giant, Torm had bought a second one recently. The bodyguards were invited to share the women in the silk rooms at the Hot Wells, to take their pick of the food and the women, after their masters, of course. Hoby had swum in the warm pool. He told Tib all about the pool, about the women, about the food—minced livers of capon, the tongues of unborn lambs.

So when Falli said to me that Torm had taken Ris and Sallo to the Hot Wells, though my mind seemed blank as if I'd run into a stone wall and been stunned, I went after a little while to the kitchens and looked for Tib. I thought he might know something from Hoby. I don't know what I thought he might know. He knew nothing. When I told him what Falli had said, he looked taken aback for a moment, dismayed. Then he said, "There are a lot of women there, the Rundas keep dozens of slave women there. Torm just took the girls there to have a good time."

I don't know what I answered, but it made Tib go sullen and defensive. "Look, Gav, maybe you're teacher's pet and all, but remember, after all, Sal and Ris are gift-girls."

"They weren't given to Torm," I said. I spoke slowly, because my mind was still blank and slow. "Ris is a virgin. Sallo was given to Yaven. Torm can't take them out of the house. He can't have taken them there. The Mother would never allow it."

Tib shrugged. "Maybe Falli got the story mixed up," he said, and turned away to his work.

I went to Iemmer and told her what Falli said. I repeated what I'd said to Tib—that it could not be: the Mother would not allow it.

Iemmer, who like so many people since the siege now looked much older than she was, said nothing at all for a while. Then only a great "Ah," and shook her head, again and again.

“Oh, this is— This is not good,” she said. “I hope, I hope Falli is wrong. She must be. How could she let him take off the girls without permission? I’ll speak with her. And with other women in the silk rooms. Oh, Sallo!” She had always loved my sister best of all the girls. “No, it can’t be,” she said with more energy. “Of course you’re right, Mother Falimer-ío wouldn’t allow it. Never. Yaven-dí’s Sallo! And little Ris! No, no, no. That suet-headed Falli has got something mixed up. I’ll go get this straight right now.”

I was used to trusting Iemmer, who generally did get things straight. I went off to the schoolroom and put my young pupils through their drills and recitations. I kept my mind from thinking until the morning was over. I went to the refectory. People were talking, a group of them, men and women. “No,” Tan was saying, “I put the horses in myself. He took them off in the closed car, with Hoby and that lout he bought from the Rundas in with them, and himself driving the horses.”

“Well, if the Mother let them go, there’s no harm in it,” Ennumer said in her high vague voice.

“Of course the Mother let them go!” said another woman, but Tan, who was second hostler now, shook his head and said, “They were bundled up like a lot of washing in sacks. I didn’t know who they were, even, till Sallo pokes out her head and tries to shout out something. Then Hoby pushes her back into the car like a sack of meal and bang goes the door and off they go at a gallop.”

“A prank, like,” one of the older men said.

“A prank that’ll get Sonny-dí and Twinny into some trouble with Daddy-dí, maybe!” Tan said savagely. He saw me then. His dark eyes locked on mine. “Gav,” he said. “You know anything about it? Did Sallo talk to you?”

I shook my head. I couldn’t speak.

“Ah, it’ll be all right,” Tan said, after a moment. “A prank, like uncle said. A damn fool stupid joke. They’ll be back this evening.”

I stood there with the others, but it was as if everything and everyone moved away from me and I stood alone in a place where there was nothing and no one. I moved through the halls and courts of Arcamand with an emptiness around me. Voices came to me from a distance.

The emptiness closed in and became dark, a low rough roof of black stone, a cave.

“I know things,” Sallo said to me. “And I know I know them. We Marsh people, we have our powers!” And she laughed. Her bright eyes shone.

I knew she was dead before they sent for me, before Everra told me. They thought it proper that Everra should be the one to tell me.

An accident, last night, in the pool at the Hot Wells. A sad accident, a terrible thing, Everra said, tears in his eyes.

“An accident,” I said.

He said Sallo had been drowned—had drowned, he corrected himself—had drowned, as the young men, who had drunk too much and gone past all decency, were playing with the girls in the pool.

“The pool of warm water,” I said, “where there are peacocks on the marble.”

Yes, my teacher said, looking up at me with tear-wet eyes. He seemed to me to have a sly, cringing expression, as if he was ashamed of himself for doing something he should not have done but would not confess, like a schoolboy.

“Ris is home,” he said, “with the women in the silk rooms. She is in a lamentable state, poor girl. Not injured, but . . . It was madness, madness. We know that Torm-dí has always—has always had this frenzy that comes upon him—but to take the girls out of the house! To take them there, among those men! Madness, madness. Oh the shame, the shame, the pity of it, oh, my poor Gavir,” and my teacher bowed his grey head before me, hiding his wet eyes and cringing face. “And what will Yaven-dí say!” he cried.

I went through the halls, past the room of the Ancestors, to the library, and sat there a while alone. The emptiness was around me, the silence. I asked Sallo to come to me, but no one came. “Sister,” I said aloud, but I could not hear my voice.

Then I thought, and it was perfectly clear to me, that if she had been drowned she would be lying on the floor of the pool of green water warm as blood. If she was not there, where was she? She could not be there, so she could not have been drowned.

I went looking for her. I went to the silk rooms, to the western court. I said to women I met there, “I’m looking for my sister.”

I had forgotten who the women were, the people that took me to her, but I knew her.

She was lying among white cloths that covered her up. Her face, which was all I could see, was not rosy brown but greyish, with a dark bruise across one cheek. Her eyes were closed, and she looked small and tired. I knelt beside her, and they let me be there.

I remember that they came and said, “The Mother has sent for you, Gavir,” as if this was a solemn, important thing. I kissed Sallo and told her I’d be back soon. I went with them.

They took me through the familiar corridors to the Mother’s apartments, which I knew only from outside; Sallo was allowed in to sweep the Mother’s rooms, but not I; I only swept the hallways there. She was waiting for me, tall in her long robes, the Mother of Arcamand. “We are so sorry, so sorry, Gavir, for your sister’s death,” she said in her beautiful voice. “Such a tragic accident. Such a sweet girl. I do not know how I am ever to tell my son Yaven. It will be a bitter grief to him. I know you loved your sister. I loved her too. I hope the knowledge of that will be some comfort to you. And this.” She put into my hands a small heavy pouch of silk. “I will send my own women to her funeral,” she said, gazing earnestly at me. “Our hearts are broken for our sweet Sallo.”

I reverenced her and stood there. The people came and took me away again.

They would not take me back to Sallo. I never saw her face again, so I had to remember it greyish, bruised, and tired. I didn’t want to remember it that way, so I turned away from the memory, I forgot it.

They took me back to my teacher, but he did not want me nor I him. As soon as I saw him, words broke out of me—“Will they punish Torm? Will they punish him?”

Everra started back as if afraid of me. “Be calm, Gavir, be calm,” he said placatingly.

“Will they punish him?”

“For the death of a slave girl?”

Around his words silence spread out. Silence enlarged around me, wider and deeper. I was in a pool, at the bottom of a pool, not of water but of silence and emptiness, and it went on to the end of the world. I could not breathe the air, but I breathed that emptiness.

Everra was talking. I saw his mouth open and shut. His eyes glistened. An old grey-haired man opening and shutting his mouth. I turned away.

There was a wall across my mind. On the other side of the wall was what I couldn't remember because it hadn't happened. I had never been able to forget, but now I could. I could forget days, nights, weeks. I could forget people. I could forget everything I'd lost, because I'd never had it.

But I remember the burial ground when I stand there, very early the next morning, just as day lightens the sky. I remember it because I've remembered it before.

When we buried old Gammy, when we buried little Miv, I remember standing there in the green rain of the willows, just outside the walls, by the river, and wondering who we were burying on this other morning.

It must be someone important, for all the Mother's personal serving women are there in their white mourning garments, hiding their faces in their long shawls, and the body is wrapped in beautiful white silk, and Iemmer is weeping aloud. She can't say the prayer to Ennu-Mé. When she tries to, she makes a shrieking wail that tears a horrible, raw hole in the silence, so that now other women, weeping too, have gone to her to hold and console her.

I stand near the water and watch how it eats at the riverbank, lapping and gnawing at the earth, undercutting the bank, eating away at it so that the grass overhangs it, the white roots of the grass dangling down into the air above the water. If you looked in the earth of the bank you'd find white bones thin as roots, bones of little children buried there where the water would come and eat their graves.

A woman stood not far from me, not with the other women. A long, ragged shawl was pulled over her head and hid her face, but she looked at me once. It was Sotur. I know that. I remember, for a little while.

When she and the other women were gone, there were some people around me, men, and I asked them if I could stay there in the cemetery. One of them was Tan, the stableman, who was kind to me when we were boys. He was kind to me then. He put his hand on my shoulder. "You'll be back in a bit, then?"

I nodded.

His lips were pinched together to keep from trembling. He said, "She was the sweetest girl I ever knew, Gav."

He went off with the others. There was nobody in the cemetery now. They had put the green sod back over the grave as well as they could so that it hardly showed among all the other graves, but it didn't matter, since the river would wash all the graves away and there would be nothing left but a few white rags twisting in the current going to the sea. I walked away from the grave, upstream along the Nisas, under the willows.

The way narrowed to a path between the city wall and the river, and then I was at the River Gate. I waited for the market traffic coming into the city across the bridge to pass, heavy wagons drawn by white oxen, little carts pulled by a donkey or by a slave. At last there was a space among them so I could cross the roadway. I went on up the west bank of the Nisas. The path was pleasant, wandering nearer and farther from the river-bank, passing the small gardens that thrifty freemen planted and tended. Some old men were already in their plots, hoeing, weeding, enjoying the mild spring morning, the cloudy sunrise. I walked on into the silence, the empty world. I walked under a low ceiling of raw black rock into the dark.

THERE IS MUCH I will never remember of the days after that day. When at last I learned forgetting, I learned it very quickly and all too well. What fragments I can find of those days may be memories or may not, they may be the other kind of remembering that I do, of times that have not come and places I have not yet been. I lived where I was and where I was not, all those days, all that time, a month, two months. I wasn't walking away from Arcamand, because there was nothing behind me but a wall, and I'd forgotten most of what lay on the other side of it. There was nothing ahead of me at all.

I walked. Who walked with me? Ennu, who guides us in death? or Luck, who is deaf in the ear you pray to? The way took me. If there was a path I followed it, if there was a bridge I crossed it, if there was a village and I smelled food and was hungry, I went and bought food. In my pocket, ever since it was given to me, I had carried the little silk purse as full and heavy with money as a heart is full and heavy with blood. Six silver pieces, eight eagles, twenty half-bronzes, nine quarter-bronzes. I counted them first as I sat by the Nisas, hidden among flowering shrubs and high grass. In the

villages I spent only the quarter-bronzes. Even they were more than many people could change. Villagers and farmers gave me extra food when they could not give me pennies. Few people grudged me food, and some would rather give it than sell it to me. I wore white, the white of mourning, and I spoke as educated men of the city speak, and when they said, “Where are you going, dí?” I said, “I am going to bury my sister.”

“Poor boy,” I heard women say. Sometimes little children ran after me shouting, “Crazy! Crazy!” but they never came close to me.

I wasn’t robbed by the poor people I went among because I had no thought of being robbed, no fear of it. If I had been robbed it wouldn’t have mattered to me at all. When you have nothing to pray for, that’s when Luck hears you.

If Arcamand had sought their runaway slave then, they would have found me easily enough. I didn’t hide. Anyone along the Nisas could have put them on my trail. Probably at Arcamand they said to one another that Gavir had drowned himself that morning at the slave cemetery after the others left, that he had taken a heavy stone in his arms and walked out into the river. Instead I took the Mother’s silken purse heavy with money because it was in my pocket, and walked out into the empty world because it didn’t occur to me to take a stone and walk into the river. It didn’t matter where I walked. The ways were all the same. There was only one way I could not go, and that was back.

I crossed the Nisas somewhere. The little roads between villages took me round and about, one direction then another. One day I saw the heads of high, round, green hills ahead of me. I had wandered onto the Ventine Road. If I kept on it that road would take me up into the hills, to the farm, to Sentas. Those names and places came to me out of the forgetting. I remembered Sentas, the farm, I remembered someone who lived there: the farm slave Comy.

I sat down in the shade of an oak and ate some bread someone had given me. Thinking was a slow business for me then, it took a long time. Comy had been a friend. I thought I could go up to the farm and stay there. All the house slaves knew me, they’d treat me well. Comy would fish with me.

Maybe the farm had been burned to the ground when Casicar invaded, the orchards hacked down, the vines torn out.

Maybe I could live in Sentas, as if it were a real place.

All the slow, stupid thoughts went by and I got up and turned my back on the road to Vente. I walked between two fields on a lane that went northeast.

The lane took me to a road, narrow and rutted, with very few people on it. It kept going, leading away from things I remembered and wanted to forget, and I kept going on it. There was a town where I bought food in the market, enough for several days, and bought a rough brown blanket I could use for a bed at night. Later there was a desolate village where the dogs came out and barked and kept me from stopping there. But there was nothing to stop for.

After that village the road dwindled to a footpath. No crops were planted on the rolling hills. Sheep grazed, scattered out on the slopes, and their tall grey guard dog would stand up and watch me as I passed. Trees grew thick in the dales between the hills. I slept in those groves, drinking from the small streams that ran down among them. When I had no more food, for a while I looked for something to eat. It was too early for anything but a few tiny strawberries, and I did not know what to look for. I gave up looking and went on walking up the path between the hills. Hunger is painful. There was a thought in my head, not a memory, only a thought, that while I ate so well with the priests of the Shrine, there was someone who had not had enough to eat, so that the baby starved in her womb, and so now it was my turn to go hungry. It was only fair.

The distance I walked each day got shorter. I sat down often in the hot sunshine among the wild grasses. The flowering grasses were beautiful in their diversity. I would watch the little flies and bees in the air, or remember what had happened or not happened, as if it were all one dream. The day would pass, the sun would pass on its great path across the sky, before I got up and trudged on looking for a place to sleep. I lost the path one day and after that followed nothing but the folds of the hills.

I was going slowly down a slope to find the stream at the bottom in the early twilight, feeling my legs shake under me, when something came rushing at me from behind and I felt my breath go out of me as the trees whirled around in a burst of light.

Some time after that I was lying in a strange, strong-smelling bed of furs. Not far above my face was a ceiling, a low vault of raw black rock. It was almost dark. Beside me something warm pressed against my leg, a big

animal. It raised its head, a dog's long, grey, heavy head, grim black lips, dark eyes that gazed across me. It made a whining groan and got up and stepped over my legs. Someone spoke to it, then came and crouched down beside me. He spoke to me but I didn't understand for a long time. I stared at him in the weak light that seemed to glance and reflect off the black rocks on the floor of the cave. I could see the whites of his eyes clearly, and the grey-black hair that stuck out in shaggy clumps around his dark face. He smelled stronger than the dirty, half-cured furs of the bed. He brought me water in a cup made of bark, and helped me drink, for I couldn't lift my head.

Most of the time I lay in the low cave room, I had no memories of any other place or time. I was there, only there. I was alone, except when the dog was with me, lying by my left leg. Sometimes it raised its head and stared into the dark air. It never looked into my face. When the man came stooping into the room, the dog stood up and went to him, putting its long nose into his hand, and then went out. Later it would come back with him or by itself, step over me, turn round once, and lie down by my leg. Its name was Guard.

The man's name was Cuga or Cuha. Sometimes he said one, sometimes the other. He talked strangely, deep in his throat, as if something obstructed his voice, which came out as if through rocks. When he came, he would sit down by me, give me fresh water, and offer me food: usually thin strips of smoke-dried meat or fish, sometimes a few berries as they came ripe. He never gave me much at a time. "What were you doing then, starving?" he said. He talked a good deal when he was with me, and often I heard him in the other part of the cave talking to himself or to the dog, the same low gargling broken stream of words never waiting for an answer. To me he said, "What did you want to go starving for anyhow? There's food. Food where you find it. What brought you up here? I thought you was from Derram. I thought they was after me again. I followed you, you know. I followed you and watched. I can watch all day. I told Guard, Lay low. You got up and I thought you was going on, but then you come straight down here, straight to my door, what am I to do, man? I'm behind you, I got my stick in hand, and so I hit you on the head, whack!" and he pantomimed a tremendous blow and laughed, showing his brown, wide-spaced teeth. "You never knew I was there, did you? I killed him, I

thought, I killed him. You went down like a dead branch, there you was, I killed him. So much for Derram! So then I take a look and it's a kid. Sampa, Sampa, I gone and killed a kid! No, not dead. Didn't even break his fool egg head. But he's down like a dead branch. A kid. I picked you up with one hand like a fawn. I'm strong, you know. They all know that. They don't come here. What did you come here for, boy? What brought you? What was you starving for? Lying there with ten thousand moneys in your purse! Bronzes, silvers, the faces of gods! Rich as King Cumbelo! What was you starving for? What sort of place is this to come with all those moneys? You going to buy deer from Lady Iene? Are you crazy, boy?" He nodded. "You are, you are."

Then he chuckled and said, "So am I, boy. Crazy Cuga." He chuckled again and gave me a sliver of sweet fibrous meat, bitter with smoke and ash. I slowly chewed at it, my mouth full of the juices of hunger.

That was all there was for a while, my hunger, the vivid taste of the food he doled out to me, his broken voice talking, the black rock roof above my face, the reek of smoke and fur, the dog pressed against my leg. Then I could sit up. Then I could crawl to the entrance of the rock chamber, and discover that it was the innermost, lowest one of several such chambers in the cave which Cuga had made his house. Slowly I explored them. In some you could stand up, at least in the center, and the largest room was quite spacious, though its floor was a jumble of big stones. The black rock of the cave was porous and cracked, and light came through cracks and crevices from above, making a smoky dimness. When I first went out, the sunlight blinded me with great dazzling bursts of red and gold, and the air smelled sweet as honey.

From outside the cave, even at its very entrance, you could not see it, only a massive slant of rocks like a dry waterfall all overgrown with creepers and fern.

Cuga's possessions were the deerskins and rabbit furs he had crudely cured; some bark cups; some spoons and other implements he had whittled of alderwood; a roll of fine sinew; and his treasures—a metal box half full of dirty salt crystals, a tinderbox for fire making, and two horn-handled hunter's knives of good steel, which he kept sharp on a fine-grained river pebble. Of these treasures he was fiercely jealous, suspicious of me, hiding them from me. I never knew where he kept the salt. The first time he had

to bring out one of the knives where I could see it, he flourished it at me snarling and said in his choked voice, “Don’t touch it, don’t touch it, or by the Destroyer I’ll cut out your heart with it.”

“I won’t touch it,” I said.

“It’ll turn and cut your throat of itself if you do.”

“I never will.”

“You’re a liar,” he said. “Liars, men are liars.” Sometimes he would say a thing like that over and over, and would say nothing else all day: *Men are liars, men are liars . . . Keep away, keep out! Keep away, keep out!* . . . At other times his talk was sane enough.

I had little to say, and that seemed to suit him. He talked to me as he did to the dog, recounting his daily expeditions through the woods to his rabbit snares and fishing holes and berry patches, everything he had caught or seen or smelled or heard. I listened just as the dog did to these long tales, intently, not interrupting.

“You’re a runaway,” he said to me one evening as we sat out looking up through the leaves at the heavy, bright stars of August. “House slave, brought up soft. You run away. You think I’m a slave, don’t you? Oh no. Oh no. You want runaways? You go on north, go on to the forest, that’s where they are. I got nothing to do with them. Liars, thieves. I’m a free man. I was born free. I don’t want to mix with them. Nor the farmers. Nor the townsfolk, Sampa destroy them, liars, cheats, thieves. All of them liars, cheats, thieves.”

“How do you know I’m a slave?” I asked.

“What else could you be?” he said with his dark grin and quick, canny look.

I didn’t know.

“I come here to be free of them, all of them,” Cuga said. “They call me the wild man, the hermit, they’re afraid of me. They leave me be. Cuga the hermit! They keep away. They keep out.”

I said, “You’re the Master of Cugamand.”

He sat for a while in silence and then he broke out in his choked, chuckling laugh, and slapped his thigh with his big, heavy hand. He was a big man, and very strong, though he must have been fifty or more. “Say it again,” he said.

“You’re the Master of Cugamand.”

“That I am! That I am! This is my domain and I’m the master here! By the Destroyer, that’s the truth. I met a man that speaks truth! By the Destroyer! A man that speaks truth! He come here and how do I welcome him? Smash his head in with a stick! How’s that for a greeting? Welcome to Cugamand!” And he laughed for a long time. He would be silent and then laugh again, and then again. At last he looked over at me through the grey starlight and said, “You’re a free man here. Trust me.”

I said, “I trust you.”

Cuga lived in filth and never bathed, and his carelessly tanned hides and furs stank and rotted; but he was meticulous in preserving and storing food. He smoke-dried the meat of all the larger animals he caught—rabbits, hares, the occasional fawn—and hung it from the roof of the fireplace room of the cave. He set snares for the little creatures of the grasslands too, wood rats, even harvest mice, and those he broiled on the fire and ate fresh. His snares were wonderfully clever and his patience endless, but he had no luck with his hooks and lines and seldom caught a fish big enough to be worth smoking. I could help him there. The sinew that was all he had for lines softened in the water; I pulled out some of the linen warp threads from the end of my brown blanket, and using them with the fine bone hooks he carved, I caught some big perch and bass as well as the little brown trout that swarmed in the pools of the stream. He showed me how to dry and smoke the fish. Aside from that I was of little use to him. He did not want me with him on his expeditions. Often he ignored me entirely all day long, lost in his muttered repetitions, but when he ate he always shared his food with me and with Guard.

I never asked him why he’d taken me in and kept me alive. It didn’t occur to me as a question. I never asked him any questions but one. I asked where Guard came from.

“Sheepdog bitch,” he said. “Had her litter up over there east on the rocky slopes. I seen the pups playing. Thought they was wolves, went over there with my knife to dig ’em out and cut their throats. I just got to the den and the bitch come round the hill, and she was going to go for me, but I says hey now, hey there, mother, I’ll kill a wolf but never hurt a dog, will I? And she shows her teeth”—he showed his brown teeth in a grinning snarl—“and goes into the den. And so I go back and back, and we get to know each other, and she brings the pups out, and I watch ’em play. And

this one and I got on. So he come away with me. I go back there sometimes. She's got a litter there now."

He never asked me any questions at all.

If he had, I would have had no answers. When I found myself remembering anything, I turned away from it to whatever was under my eyes and in my hands and lived in that only. I had none of the rememberings, the visions I used to have. If I dreamed in sleep, I did not remember the dreams when I woke.

The light in the mornings was more golden, the days ending sooner, the nights growing cool. The Master of Cugamand, sitting across a small fire from me in the hearth room of his cave, slid a whole troutlet off the stick into his mouth, chewed a while, swallowed, wiped his hands on his naked, dirt-caked chest, and said, "Cold here in winter. You'd be dead of it."

I said nothing. He knew what he was talking about.

"You go on."

After a long time I said, "Nowhere to go, Cuga."

"Oh yes. Oh yes. The woods, that's where you go." He nodded towards the north. "The woods. Daneran. The big forest. No end to it they say. And no slave takers there. Oh no. No slave takers. Just the men of the woods. That's where to go."

"No roof," I said, and put another bit of bark on the fire.

"Oh yes. Oh yes. They live soft there. Roofs and walls and all. Beds and coats and all. They know me, I know them. We don't trouble each other. They know me. They keep away." He scowled and went off into one of his mutterings, *Keep away, keep out* . . .

Next morning he shook me awake early. On the flat stone in front of the cave entrance he had set out my brown blanket, the silk purse swollen with money, a filthy fur cape he had given me a while ago, and a packet of dried meat. "Come on," he said.

I stood still. His face went watchful and grim.

"Keep this for me," I said, holding out the silk purse.

He chewed his lip.

"Don't want to be killed for it, eh?" he said finally, and I nodded.

"Maybe," he said. "Maybe they would. Thieves, cheats . . . I don't want this stuff. Where'd I keep it from thieves?"

"In your salt box," I said.

He glared. “Where’s that?” he snapped, fiercely suspicious.

I shrugged again. “I don’t know. I never found it. Nobody could.”

That made him laugh, slowly, opening his mouth wide. “I know,” he said. “I know! All right.”

The heavy, stained, discolored purse was swallowed up in his big hand. He went back into the cave with it and was gone some while. He came out and nodded at me. “Come on,” he said. And he set off at his loping walk that seemed slow but ate up the miles.

I was fit again, and could keep up with him all day, though by evening I was weary and footsore.

At the last stream we came to he told me to drink deep. We crossed it, climbed a long slope, and halted on the top of the hill, the last of the hills. From it the land fell slowly away into vast forest, treetops going on and on into blue dimness, no end to them. The sun had not set, but the shadows were long.

Cuga was busy immediately; he gathered wood and built a fire, a large one, using green wood, not dry. The smoke went curling up into the clear sky. “All right,” he said. “They’ll come.” And he turned to go back as we had come.

“Wait,” I said.

He stopped, impatient. “Just wait,” he said. “They’ll be here.”

“I’ll come back, Cuga.”

He shook his head angrily and went off, striding through the dry grass, holding his body in a slight crouch. In a minute he was out of sight through the trees under the crest of the hill. Over the dark treetops the sunset flamed.

I slept alone by the fire on the hilltop that night, wrapped in my blanket and the fur cape. The smoky stink of the fur was pleasant to me. I had been healed in that stink.

I waked again and again in the night. Once I built up the fire, as a signal, not for warmth. Towards morning I dreamed: I was sleeping in Sentas, in the fortress of dreams. The others were there with me. I heard their soft voices murmuring in the dark. One of the girls laughed . . . I woke and remembered the dream. I clung to it, trying to stay in it. But I was thirsty, thirst had waked me. Telling myself I’d go look for water at the foot of the hill as soon as it was light, I lay waiting for the light.

We never slept in Sentas, I thought. We always slept out near the farmhouse, under the trees. We always saw the stars through the leaves. We talked about going out to Sentas to sleep but we never did.

Chapter 8

FOUR OF them were around me before I saw one of them. I was barely awake. I had sat up, on the open hillside by the dead fire, alone. They were around me, without movement, out of the grass, out of the dim grey air of early dawn. I looked from one to the next and sat still.

They were armed, not like soldiers but with short bows and long knives. Two carried five-foot staffs. They looked grim.

One of them finally spoke in a soft, hoarse voice, almost a whisper. “Fire out?”

I nodded.

He went and kicked at the few half-burnt sticks left, trampled them carefully, felt them with his hands. I got up to help him bury the cold cinders.

“Come on then,” he said. I bundled up my blanket and the last scraps of dried meat to carry. I wore the cape of rabbit and squirrel skins for warmth.

“Stinks,” said one of the men.

“Reeks,” said another. “Bad as old Cuga.”

“He brought me here,” I said.

“Cuga?”

“You was with him?”

“All summer.”

One stared, one spat, one shrugged; the fourth, the one who had spoken first, motioned with his head and led us down the long hill towards the forest.

I knelt to drink from the stream at the foot of the hill. The hoarse-voiced leader nudged me with his staff while I was still drinking thirstily. “That’s enough, you’ll be pissing all day,” he said. I scrambled up and followed them across the stream and under the dark eaves of the trees.

He led us all the way. We moved hastily through the woods, often at a trot, until mid-morning, when we stopped in a small clearing. It smelled of stale blood. A pack of vultures flapped up heavily on great black wings from some remnants of guts and skulls. The carcasses of three deer had been butchered and hung, glittering with flies, high from a tree limb. The men brought them down and divided and roped them so each of us could carry a load of meat, and we set off again, but now at an easier pace. I was tormented with thirst and by the flies that kept swarming around us and our burdens. The load I carried was not well balanced, and my feet, sore from the long walk yesterday, blistered in my old shoes. The trail we followed was very slight and winding, seldom visible more than a few paces ahead among the big, dark trees, and often made difficult by tree roots. When we came at last to a stream crossing I went right down again on hands and knees to drink.

The leader turned back to stir me up, saying, “Come on! You can drink when we get there!” But one of the other men was down with his face in the water too, and looked up to say, “Ah, let him drink, Brigin.” The leader said nothing then, but waited for us.

The water bathed my feet with wonderful coolness as we waded across the stream, but then as we went on the blisters grew worse, my wet shoes rubbing them, and I was hobbling with pain by the time we came to the forest camp. We cast down our burdens of venison in an open shed, and I could stand up straight at last and look around.

If I’d come there from where I used to live, it wouldn’t have looked like anything at all—a few low huts, a few men, in a meadow where alders grew by a small stream, dark forest all around. But I came there from the lonesome wilderness. The sight of the buildings was strange and impressive to me, and the presence of other people even stranger and more frightening.

Nobody paid any attention to me. I got up my courage and went to the stream under the alders, drank my fill at last, then took off my shoes and put my raw, burning, bloody feet in the water. It was warm in the meadow, the autumn sun still pouring into it. Presently I took off my clothes and got into the water entirely. I washed myself, then I washed my clothes as well as I could. They had been white. White clothing is worn by a girl in her betrothal ceremony, and by the dead, and by those who go to bury the dead.

There was no telling what color my clothes had been. They were brown and grey, rag-color. I did not think about their whiteness. I laid them on the grass to dry and got back in the stream and put my head under water to wash my hair. When I came up I couldn't see, for my hair hung down over my eyes, it had grown so long. It was filthy and matted and I washed it again and again. When I came up from the last dip and scrubbing, a man was sitting beside my clothes on the stream bank, watching me.

"It's an improvement," he said.

He was the one who'd told the leader to let me drink.

He was short and brown, with high, ruddy cheekbones and narrow, dark eyes; his hair was cut short to his head. He had an accent, a way of talking that came from somewhere else.

I came up out of the water, dried myself as well as I could with the old brown blanket, and pulled on my wet tunic, seeking modesty, though there seemed to be only men around, and also seeking warmth. The sun had left the clearing though the sky was still bright. I shivered. But I didn't want to put the filthy fur cape on my hard-won cleanness.

"Hey," he said, "hang on." He went off and came back with a tunic and some kind of garment I did not recognise. "They're dry, anyhow," he said, handing them to me.

I shucked off my limp wet tunic and put on the one he gave me. It was brown linen, much worn, soft, long-sleeved. It felt warm and pleasant on my skin. I held up the other piece of clothing he had brought. It was black and made of some heavy, dense material; it must be a cape, I thought. I tried to put it on over my shoulders. I could not get it to fit.

The man watched me for a little while and then he lay back on the stream bank and began to laugh. He laughed till his eyes disappeared entirely and his face turned dark red. He curled up over his knees and laughed till you could tell it hurt him, and though it wasn't a noisy laugh, some men heard and came over and looked at him and looked at me, and some of them began laughing too.

"Oh," he said at last, wiping his eyes and sitting up. "Oh. That did me good. That's a kilt, young 'un. You wear it—" and he began to laugh again, and doubled up, and wheezed, and finally said, "You wear it on the other end."

I looked at the thing, and saw it had a waistband, like trousers.

“I’ll do without,” I said. “If you don’t mind.”

“No,” he said, wheezing. “I don’t mind. Give it back, then.”

“Why would the kid want one of your fool skirts, Chamry?” one of the onlookers said. “Here, kid, I’ll get you something decent.” He came back with a pair of breeches that fit me well enough, though loosely. When I had them on he said, “Keep ’em, they’re too tight for my belly. So you came in with Brigin and them today? Joining up, are you? What’ll we call you?”

“Gavir Arca,” I said.

The man who had given me the kilt said, “That’s your name.”

I looked at him, not understanding.

“Do you want to use it?” he asked.

I had done so little thinking for so long, my mind would not move quickly at all; it needed a lot of time. I said at last, “Gav.”

“Gav it is,” said the man who had given me the kilt. “I’m Chamry Bern of Bernmant, and I use my name, for I’m so far from where I came that no one can track me by name or fame or any game.”

“He’s from where the men wear skirts and the women piss standing,” said one of the onlookers, and got some laughter from the others.

“Lowlanders,” said Chamry Bern, of them, not to them. “They know no better. Come on, you, Gav. You’d better take the oath, if that’s what you came for, and get your share of dinner. I saw you carrying in your share of it and more.”

The god Luck is deaf in one ear, they say, the ear we pray to; he can’t hear our prayers. What he hears, what he listens to, nobody knows. Denios the poet said he hears the wheels of the stars’ great chariots turning on the roads of heaven. I know that while I was sunk far beneath any thought of prayer, with no hope, no trust in anything, no desire, Luck was always with me. I lived, though I took no care to survive. I came to no harm among strangers. I carried money and was not robbed. When I was alone and on the verge of death, an old mad hermit beat me back to life. And now Luck had sent me to these men, and one of them was Chamry Bern.

Chamry went and whacked on a crowbar hung from a post of the largest hut. The signal brought men to gather around the porch of the hut. “Newcomer,” he said. “Gav is his name. He says he’s been living with

Cuga the Ogre, which would explain the smell that came with him. And after a bath in our river he seeks to join our company. Right, Gav?”

I nodded. I was intimidated by being the center of what seemed to me a great crowd of men—twenty or more—all looking me over. Most of them were young and had a trim, fit, hard look, like Brigin, the man who’d led me here, though there were several grey or bald heads and a couple of slack bellies.

“Do you know who we are?” one of the bald heads demanded.

I took a deep breath. “Are you the Barnavites?”

That caused some scowling and some laughter. “Some of us used to be,” the man said, “maybe. And what do you know of Barna’s lot, boy?”

I was younger than they were, but I didn’t like being called kid and boy all the time. It put my back up.

“I heard stories. That they lived in the forest as free men, neither masters or slaves, sharing fairly all they had.”

“Well put,” said Chamry. “All in a nutshell.” Several men looked pleased and nodded.

“Well enough, well enough,” the bald man said, keeping up his dignity. Another man came up close to me; he looked very much like Brigin, and as I learned later they were brothers. His face was hard and handsome, his eyes clear and cold. He looked me over. “If you live with us you’ll learn what fair sharing means,” he said. “It means what we do, you do. It’s one for all with us. If you think you can do whatever you like, you won’t last here. If you don’t share, you don’t eat. If you’re careless and bring danger on us, you’re dead. We have rules. You’ll take an oath to live with us and keep our rules. And if you break that oath, we’ll hunt you down surer than any slave taker.”

Their faces were grim; they all nodded at what he said.

“You think you can keep that oath?”

“I can try,” I said.

“Try’s not good enough.”

“I’ll keep your oath,” I said, my temper roused by his bullying.

“We’ll see,” he said, turning away. “Get the stuff, Modla.”

The bald man and Brigin brought out of the hut a knife, a clay bowl, a deer antler, and some meal. I will not tell the ceremony, for those who go through it are sworn to secrecy, nor can I tell the words of the oath I took.

They all swore that oath again with me. The rites and the oath-speaking brought them all together in fellow feeling, and when all was done and spoken several of them came to pound my back and tell me I'd borne the initiation well, and was a brave fellow, and welcome among them.

Chamry Bern had come forward as my sponsor, and a young man called Venne as my hunting mate. They sat on either side of me at the celebration that followed. Meat had already been roasting on spits, but they added more to make a feast of it, and night had fallen by the time we sat to eat—on the ground, or on stumps and crude stools, around the red, dancing fires. I had no knife. Venne took me in to a chest of weapons and told me to choose one. I took a light, keen blade in a leather sheath. With it I cut myself a chunk out of a sizzling, dripping, blackened, sweet-smelling haunch and sat down with it and ate like a starved animal. Somebody brought me a metal cup and poured something into it—beer or mead—sour and somewhat foamy. The men laughed louder as they drank, and shouted, and laughed again. My heart warmed to their good fellowship—the friendship of the Forest Brothers. For that was the name they called themselves, and had given me, since I was one of them.

All around the firelit clearing was the night forest, utter darkness under the trees, high leaf crowns grey in the starlight for miles and miles.

IF CHAMRY BERN hadn't taken a liking to me and if Venne hadn't taken me as his hunting partner I would have had a worse time of it that fall and winter than I did. As it was, I was often at the limit of my endurance. I'd lived wild with Cuga, but he'd looked after me, sheltered me, fed me, and that was in summer, too, when it's easy to live wild. Here my city softness, my lack of physical strength, my ignorance of the skills of survival, were nearly the death of me. Brigin and his brother Eter and several other men had been farm slaves, used to a hard life, tough, fearless, and resourceful, and to them I was a dead loss, a burden. Other men in the group, town-bred, had some patience with my wretched incompetence, and gave and taught me what I needed to get by. As with Cuga, my knack at fishing gave me a way to show I could try at least to be useful. I showed no promise at

all in hunting, though Venne took me with him conscientiously and tried to train me with the short bow and in all the silent skills of the hunter.

Venne was twenty or so; at fifteen he had run away from a vicious master in a town of the region of Casicar, and made his way to the forest—for everybody in Casicar, he said, knew about the Forest Brothers, and all the slaves dreamed of joining them. He enjoyed the life in the woods, seemed fully at home in it, and was one of the best hunters of our band; but I soon learned that he was restless. He didn't get on with Brigin and Eter. "Playing the masters," he said drily. And after a while, "And they won't have women with us . . . Well, Barna's men have women, right? I think of joining them."

"Think again," said Chamry, sewing a soft upper to a shoe sole; he was our tanner and cobbler, and made pretty good shoes and sandals for us of elk hide. "You'll be running back to us begging us to save you. You think Brigin's bossy? Never was a man could match a woman for giving orders. Men are by nature slaves to women, and women are by nature the masters of men. Hello woman, goodbye freedom!"

"Maybe," Venne said. "But there's other things comes with her."

They were good friends, and included me in their friendship and their conversation. Many of the men of the band seemed to have little use for language, using a grunt or a gesture, or sitting stolid and mute as animals. The silence of the slave had gone so deep in them they could not break it. Chamry on the other hand was a man of words; he loved to talk and listen and tell stories, rhyming and chiming them in a kind of half poetry, and was ready to discuss anything with anybody.

I soon knew his history, or as much of it as he saw fit to tell, and as near or far from the truth as suited him. He came from the Uplands, he said, a region far north and east of the City States. I'd never heard of it and asked him if it was farther than Urdile, and he said yes, far beyond Urdile, beyond even Bendraman. I knew the name of Bendraman only from the ancient tale *Chamhan*.

"The Uplands are beyond the beyond," he said, "north of the moon and east of the dawn. A desolation of hill and bog and rock and cliff, and rising over it all a huge vast mountain with a beard of clouds, the Carrantages. Nobody deserves to live in the Uplands but sheep. It's starving land, freezing land, winter forever, a gleam of sunlight once a year. It's all cut

up into little small domains, farms they'd call them here and poor sorry farms at that, but in the Uplands they're domains, and each has a master, the brantor, and each brantor has an evil power in him. Witches they are, every one. How'd you like that for a master? A man who could move his hand and say a word and turn you inside out with your guts on the ground and your eyes staring into the inside of your brain? Or a man who could look at you and you'd never think a thought of your own again, but only what he put into your head?"

He liked to go on about these awful powers, the gifts he called them, of the Upland witches, his tales growing ever taller. I asked him once, if he'd had a master, what his master's power was. That silenced him for a minute. He looked at me with his bright narrow eyes. "You wouldn't think it much of a power, maybe," he said. "Nothing to see. He could weaken the bones in a body. It took a while. But if he cast his power on you, in a month you'd be weak and weary, in half a year your legs would bend under you like grass, in a year you'd be dead. You don't want to cross a man who could do that. Oh, you lowlanders think you know what it is to have a master! In the Uplands we don't even say slave. The brantor's people, we say. He may be kin to half of 'em, his servants, his serfs—his people. But they're more slaves to him than ever the slave of the worst master down here!"

"I don't know about that," said Venne. "A whip and a couple of big dogs can do about as well as a spell of magic to destroy a man." Venne bore terrible scars on his legs and back and scalp, and one ear had been half torn off his head.

"No, no, it's the fear," Chamry said. "It's the awful fear. You didn't fear the men that beat you and the dogs that bit you, once you'd run clear away from 'em, did you? But I tell you, I ran a hundred miles away from the Uplands and my master, and still I cringed when I felt his thought turn on me. And I felt it! The strength went out of my legs and arms. I couldn't hold my back up straight. His power was on me! All I could do was go on, go on, go on, till there was mountains and rivers and miles between me and his hand and eye and cruel power. When I crossed the great river, the Trond, I grew stronger. When I crossed the second great river, the Sally, I was safe at last. The power can cross a wide water once but not twice. So a wise woman told me. But I crossed yet another to be sure! I'll never go

back north, never. You don’t know what it is to be a slave, you lowlanders!”

Yet Chamry talked often of the Uplands and the farm where he had been born, and all through his railing at it as a poor, unhappy, wretched place I heard his yearning homesickness. He made of it a vivid picture in my mind, the great barren moorlands and cloudy peaks, the bogs from which at dawn a thousand wild white cranes would rise at once, the stone-walled, slate-roofed farm huddled under the bare curve of a brown hill. As he told about it, I could see it almost as clearly as if I remembered it myself.

And that put me in mind of my own power, or whatever it was, of remembering what was yet to happen. I remembered that I had had such a power, once. But when I thought about that, I began to remember places I didn’t want to remember. Memories made my body hunch up in pain and my mind go blank in fear. I pushed them away, turned away from them. Remembering would kill me. Forgetting kept me alive.

The Forest Brothers were all men who had escaped, run away from something unendurable. They were like me. They had no past. Learning how to get through this rough life, how to endure never being dry or warm or clean, to eat only half-raw, half-burnt venison, I might have gone on with them as I had with Cuga, not thinking beyond the present hour and what was around me. And much of the time I did.

But there were times when winter storms kept us in our drafty, smoky cabins, and Chamry, Venne, and some of the other men gathered to talk in the half dark by the smoldering hearth, and then I began to hear their stories of where they came from, how they’d lived, the masters they’d escaped from, their memories of suffering and of pleasure.

Sometimes into my thoughts would come a clear image of a place: a big room full of women and children; a fountain in a city square; a sunny courtyard surrounded by arches, under which women sat spinning . . . When I saw such a place I gave it no name, and my mind turned away from it hastily. I never joined the others’ talk about the world outside the forest, and did not like to hear it.

Late one afternoon the six or seven tired, dirty, hungry men around the crude hearth in our cabin had run out of anything to talk about. We all sat in a dumb discouragement. It had been raining a cold hard rain almost ceaselessly for four days and nights. Under the cloud that pressed down on

the dark forest trees it seemed night all day long. Fog and darkness tangled in the wet, heavy boughs. To go out to get logs for the fire from the dwindling woodpile was to be wet through at once, and indeed some of us went out naked, since skin dries quicker than cloth and leather. One of our mates, Bulec, had a wretched cough that shook him about like a rat in a dog's mouth. Even Chamry had run out of jokes and tall tales. In that cold, dreary place I was thinking of summer, of the heat and light of summer on the open hills, somewhere. And a cadence came into my mind, a beat, and the words with it, and without any intention I said the words aloud.

As in the dark of winter night
The eyes seek dawn,
As in the bonds of bitter cold
The heart craves sun,
So blinded and so bound, the soul
Cries out to thee:
Be our light, our fire, our life,
    Liberty!

"Ah," Chamry said out of a silence that followed the words, "I've heard that. Heard it sung. There's a tune to it."

I sought the tune, and little by little it came to me, with the sound of the beautiful voice that had sung it. I have no singing voice, but I sang it.

"That's fine," Venne said softly.

Bulec coughed and said, "Speak some more such."

"Do that," Chamry said.

I looked into my mind for more remembered words to speak to them. Nothing came for a while. What I found at last was a line of writing. I read it: " 'Wearing the white of mourning, the maiden mounted the high steps . . .' " I said it aloud, and in a moment the line led me on to the next, and that to the next. So I told them the part of Garro's poem in which the prophetess Yurno confronts the enemy hero Rurec. Standing on the walls of Sentas, a girl in mourning, Yurno calls down to the man who killed her warrior father. She tells Rurec how he will die: "Beware of the hills of Trebs," she says, "for you will be ambushed in the hills. You will run away and hide in the bushes, but they will kill you as you try to crawl away

without being seen. They will drag your naked body to the town and display it, sprawled face down, so all can see that the wounds are in your back. Your corpse will not be burned with prayers to the Ancestors as befits a hero, but buried where they bury slaves and dogs." Enraged at her prophecy, Rurec shouts, "And this is how *you* will die, lying sorceress!" and hurls his heavy lance at her. All see it pass through her body just below the breast and fly out, trailing blood, behind her—but she stands on the battlement in her white robes, unharmed. Her brother the warrior Alira picks up the lance and hands it up to her, and she tosses it down to Rurec, not hurling it, but end over end, lightly, contemptuously. "When you're running away and hiding, you'll want this," she says, "great hero of Pagadi."

As I spoke the words of the poem, in that cold smoky hut in the half dark with the noise of the rain loud on the low roof, I saw them written in some pupil's labored handwriting in the copybook I held as I stood in the schoolroom in Arcamand. "Read the passage, Gavir," my teacher said, and I read the words aloud.

A silence followed.

"Eh, that's a fool," Bacoc said, "thro'n a lance at a witch, don't he know, can't kill a witch but with fire!"

Bacoc was a man of fifty by the look of him, though it's hard to tell the age of men who have lived their life half starved and under the whip; maybe he was thirty.

"That's a good bit of story," Chamry said. "There's more? Is there a name to it?"

I said, "It's called *The Siege and Fall of Sentas*. There's more."

"Let's have it," said Chamry, and the others all agreed.

For a time I could not recall the opening lines of the poem; then, as if I had the old copybook in my hand, there they were and I spoke them—

To the councils and senate of Sentas they came,
the envoys in armor,
With their swords in their hands, arrogant, striding
into the chamber
Where the lords of the city sat to give judgment . . .

It was night, true night, when I finished saying the first book of the poem. Our fire had burned down to embers on the rough hearth, but nobody in the circle of men had moved to build it up; nobody had moved at all for an hour.

“They’re going to lose that city of theirs,” Bulec said in the dark, in the soft drumming of the rain.

“They should be able to hold out. The others come too far from home. Like Casicar did, trying to take Etra last year,” said Taffa. It was the most I’d ever heard him say. Venne had told me Taffa had been not a slave but a freeman of a small city-state, conscripted into their army; during a battle he had escaped and made his way to the forest. Sad-faced and aloof, he seldom said anything, but now he was arguing almost volubly: “Stretched out their forces too far, see, Pagadi has, attacking. If they don’t take the town by assault quick, they’ll starve come winter.”

And they all got into the discussion, all talking exactly as if the siege of Sentas was taking place right now, right here. As if we were living in Sentas.

Of them all Chamry was the only one who understood that what I had told them was “a poem,” a thing made by a maker, a work of art, part history of long ago, part invention. It was, to them, an event; it was happening as they heard it. They wanted it to go on happening. If I’d been able to, they’d have kept me telling it to them night and day. But after my voice gave out that first evening, I lay in my wooden bunk thinking about what had been given back to me: the power of words. I had time then to think and to plan how and when to use that power—how to go on with the poem, to keep them from exhausting both it and me. I ended by telling it for an hour or two every night, after we ate, for the winter nights were endless and something to make them pass was welcome to all.

Word got about, and within a night or two most of the men of the band were crowded into our hut for “telling the war,” and for the long passionate discussions and arguments about tactics and motives and morals that followed.

There were times I couldn’t fully recall the lines as Garro wrote them, but the story was clear in my mind, so I filled in these gaps with tags of the poetry and my own narrative, until I came again to a passage that I had by memory or could “see” written, and could fall back into the harsh

rhythm of the lines. My companions didn't seem to notice the difference between my prose and Garro's poetry. They listened closest when I was speaking the poetry—but those were also often the most vivid passages of action and suffering.

When we came again in the course of the tale to the passage I'd recited first, Yurno's prophecy from the battlements, Bacoc caught his breath; and when Rurec "in a fury uplifts his heavy lance," Bacoc cried out, "Don't throw it, man! It's no good!" The others shouted at him to pipe down, but he was indignant: "Don't he know it's no good? He thro'n it before!"

I was at first merely bemused by my own capacity to recall the poetry and their capacity to listen to it. They didn't say much to me about it, but it made a difference in the way I was treated, my standing among them. I had something they wanted, and they respected me for that. Since I gave it freely, their respect was ungrudging. "Hey, haven't you got a fatter rib than that for the kid? He's got to work tonight, telling the war . . ."

But every up's a down, as Chamry said. Brigin and his brother and the men closest to them, their cabin mates, looked in at one time or another on the recital, listened a while standing near the doorway, then left in silence. They said nothing to me, but I heard from others that they said men who listened to fools' tales were worse fools than those who told them. And Brigin said that a man willing to hear a boy yammer booktalk half the night was no fit Forest Brother.

Booktalk! Why did Brigin say it in that contemptuous tone? There were no books in the forest. There had been no books in Brigin's life. Why did he sneer at them?

Any of these men might well be jealous of a knowledge that had been jealously kept from them. A farm slave who tried to learn to read could have his eyes put out or be whipped to death. Books were dangerous, and a slave had every excuse to fear them. But fear is one thing, contempt another.

I resented their sneers as mean-spirited, for I couldn't see anything unworthy of manhood in the tale I was telling. How was a tale of warfare and heroism weakening the men who listened to it so hungrily every night? Didn't it draw us together in real brotherhood, when after the telling we listened to one another argue the rights and wrongs of the generals' tactics and the warriors' exploits? To sit stupid, mute, night after night

under the rain like cattle, bored to mindlessness—was that what made us men?

Eter said something one morning, knowing he was within my hearing, about great idle fools listening to a boy tell lies. I was fed up. I was about to confront him with what I've just said, when my wrist was caught in an iron grip and a deft foot nearly tripped me.

I broke free and shouted, "What d'you think you're doing?" to Chamry Bern, who apologised for his clumsiness while renewing his grip on my wrist. "Oh keep your trap shut, Gav!" he whispered desperately, hauling me away from the group of men around Eter. "Don't you see he's baiting you?"

"He's insulting all of us!"

"And who's to stop him? You?"

Chamry had got me around behind the woodpiles now, away from the others, and seeing I was now arguing with him, not challenging Eter, he let go my wrist.

"But why— Why—"

"Why don't they love you for having a power they don't have?"

I didn't know what to say.

"And they've got the hard hand, you know, though you've got the soft voice. Oh, Gav. Don't be smarter than your masters. It costs."

In his face now was the sadness I had seen in the face of every one of these men, the mark of the harrow. They had all started with very little, and lost most of that.

"They're not my masters," I said furiously. "We're free men here!"

"Well," Chamry said, "in some ways."

Chapter 9

ETER AND Brigin, if they resented my sudden popularity, must have seen that any attempt to break up the evening gathering might rouse real opposition. They contented themselves with sneers at me, and at Chamry and Venne as my mates, but let the other men alone. So I and my fierce audience went on through all *The Siege and Fall of Sentas*, as the dark winter slowly turned towards spring. We came to the end of it just about the time of the equinox.

It was hard for some of the men to comprehend that it was over, and why it had to be over. Sentas had fallen, the walls and the great gates were torn down, the citadel burnt to the ground, the men of the city slaughtered, the women and children taken as slaves, and the hero Rurec had set off triumphant with his army and loot to Pagadi—and so, what happened next?

"Is he going to go by the hills of Trebs now?" Bacoc wanted to know. "After what the witch said?"

"Sure enough he'll go by Trebs, if not this day then another," said Chamry. "A man can't keep from going where the seer's eye saw him go."

"Well, why don't Gav tell it, then?"

"The story stops at the fall of the city, Bacoc," I said.

"What—like they all died? But it's only some of 'em dead!"

Chamry tried to explain the nature of a story to him, but he remained dissatisfied; and they were all melancholy. "Ah, it's going to be dull!" said Taffa. "I'll miss that sword fighting. It's a horrible thing when you're in it, but it's grand to hear about."

Chamry grinned. "You could say that of most things in life, maybe."

"Are there more tales like that, Gav?" somebody asked.

"There are a lot of tales," I said, cautiously. I wasn't eager to start another epic. I felt myself becoming the prisoner of my audience.

“You could tell the one we had all right over,” said one man, and several agreed enthusiastically.

“Next winter,” I said. “When the nights are long again.”

They treated my verdict as if it were a priest’s rule of ritual, accepting it without dispute.

But Bulec said wistfully, “I wish there was short tales for the short nights.” He had listened to the epic with almost painful attention, muffling his cough as well as he could; to the battle scenes he preferred the descriptions of the rooms in the palaces, the touching domestic passages, the love story of Alira and Ruoco. I liked Bulec, and it was painful to see him, a young man, getting sicker and weaker day by day even as the weather brightened and grew warm. I couldn’t withstand his plea.

“Oh, there’s some short tales,” I said. “I’ll tell you one.” And I thought first to say *The Bridge on the Nisas*, but I could not. Those words, though they were clear in my mind, bore some weight in them that I could not lift. I could not speak them.

So I put myself in the schoolroom in my mind, and opened a copybook, and there was one of Hodis Baderi’s fables, “The Man Who Ate the Moon.” I told it to them word for word.

They listened as intently as ever. The fable got a mixed reception. Some of them laughed and shouted, “Ah, that’s the best yet! That beats all!”—but others thought it silly stuff, “foolery,” Taffa said.

“Ah, but there’s a lesson in it,” said Chamry, who had listened to the tale with delight. They got to arguing whether the man who ate the moon was a liar or not. They never asked me to settle or even enter these discussions. I was, as it were, their book. I provided the text. Judgment on the text was up to them. I heard as keen moral arguments from them as I was ever to hear from learned men.

After that they often got a fable or a poem out of me in the evening, but their demand was not so urgent now that we no longer had to cower in our huts from the rain and could live outdoors and be active. Hunting and snaring and fishing went on apace, for we’d lived very thin at the end of winter and beginning of spring. We craved not only meat but the wild onions and other herbs that some of the men knew how to find in the forest. I always missed the grain porridge that had been much of our diet in the city, but there was nothing like that here.

“I heard the Forest Brothers stole grain from rich farmers,” I said once to Chamry, as we grubbed for wild horseradish.

“They do, those who can,” he said.

“Who’s that?”

“Barna’s lot, up north there.”

The name rang strangely in my head, bringing around it a whole set of fleeting images of young men talking in a crowded, warm dormitory, the face of an old priest . . . but I ignored such images. Words were what I could remember safely.

“So there really is a man called Barna?”

“Oh, yes. Though you needn’t mention him around Brigin.”

I wheedled for more, and Chamry never could resist telling a story. So I found that, as I had suspected, our band was a splinter from a larger group, with which they weren’t on good terms. Barna was the chief of that group. Eter and Brigin had rebelled against his leadership and brought a few men here to the southern part of the forest—the most remote from any settlements and so the safest for runaway slaves, but also the poorest in resources except, as Chamry said, cattle with antlers.

“Up there, they bag the real thing,” he said. “Fat bullocks. Sheep! Ah! what wouldn’t I give to taste mutton! I hate sheep from the pit of my heart, wily, woolly, wicked brutes. But when one of ’em lies down and turns into roast mutton, I could swallow him whole.”

“Do Barna’s men raise the cattle and sheep?”

“Mostly they let other folk do that for them. And then pick out a few choice ones. There’s those who’d call it thieving, but that’s too delicate and legal a word. Tithing, we called it. We tithed the farmers’ flocks.”

“So you lived there, with Barna’s band?”

“A while. Lived well, too.” Chamry sat back on his haunches and looked at me. “That’s where you should be, you know. Not here, with this lot of hard rocks and knotheads.” He knocked the dirt off a horseradish root, wiped it on his shirt, and bit into it. “You and Venne. You should be off. He’ll be welcome for his hunting, you for your golden tongue . . .” He chewed raw horseradish a while, wincing and his eyes watering. “All your tongue will do here is talk you into trouble.”

“Would you come with us?”

He spat out fiber and wiped his mouth. “By the Stone, but that’s hot! I don’t know. I came away with Brigin and them because they were my mates. And I was restless . . . I don’t know.”

He was a restless man. It wasn’t hard for Venne and me to coax him into coming with us, when we made up our minds to go. And we did that soon.

Brigin and Eter, feeling dissatisfaction among us, tried to repress it with ever harsher demands and commands. Eter told Bulec, who was deathly ill by now, that if he didn’t go out hunting for meat for the camp pot, he’d get nothing to eat from it. Eter may have just been bullying, or may have believed his threat would work; some men who live hard and in good health can’t believe sickness or weakness is anything but laziness, a sham. At any rate Bulec was scared or shamed into insisting that a hunting party take him along. He got a little way out of camp with them and collapsed, vomiting blood. When they carried him back, Venne confronted Eter, shouting that he’d killed Bulec like any slave driver. Venne rushed off in his distress and rage. He found me fishing at a pool up the stream. “We were going to find Bulec a place he could sit down and wait for us, soon as we got clear away from camp, but he couldn’t even walk that far. He’s dying. I can’t stay here, Gav. I can’t take their orders! They think they’re masters and us their slaves. I want to kill that damned Eter! I’ve got to get out.”

“Let’s talk to Chamry,” I said. We did; he counseled at first that we wait, but when he saw how dangerous Venne’s anger was, he agreed to go that night.

We ate with the others. Nobody talked. Bulec lay fighting for breath in one of the cabins. I could still hear the slow, gasping drag of his breath in the darkness before dawn when Venne, Chamry, and I stole out of camp with what little we considered ours by right: the clothes we wore, a blanket apiece, our knives, Venne’s bow and arrows, my fishing hooks and rabbit snares, Chamry’s cobbler’s toolkit, and a packet of smoked meat.

It was a couple of months after the equinox, late May, perhaps; a sweet dark night, a slow misty dawn, a morning of birdsong. It was good to be going free, leaving the rivalries and brutalities of the camp behind. I walked all day lightly, lighthearted, wondering why we’d borne Eter and Brigin’s bullying so long. But at evening, as we sat fireless, lying low in case they pursued us, my heart went down low too. I kept thinking of

Bulec, and of others: Taffa, who, being a deserter, had also deserted the wife and children he loved and could never go back to them; Bacoc, the simple heart, who didn't even know the name of the village where he'd been born a slave—"the village" was all he knew . . . They had been kind to me. And we had sworn a vow together.

"What's the trouble, Gav?" said Chamry.

"I feel like I'm running out on them," I said.

"They could run, too, if they liked," Venne said, so promptly that I knew he'd been thinking along the same lines, justifying our desertion to himself.

"Bulec can't," I said.

"He's gone farther than we've gone, by now," Chamry said. "Never fret for him. He's home . . . You're too loyal, Gav, it's a fault in you. Don't look back. Touch and go, it's best."

That seemed strange to me; what did he mean? I never looked back. I had nothing to be loyal to, nothing to hold on to. I went where my luck took me. I was like a wisp of cloth twisting and drifting in a river.

Next day we came to a part of the great forest I'd never been to. We were outside our territory from here on. The trees were evergreens, fir and hemlock. They made impenetrable walls and mazes of their fallen trunks and the young trees that sprouted out of them. We had to travel along the streambeds, and that was hard going, scrambling through water, over rocks, and around rapids, in the half darkness of the huge trees overhead. Chamry kept saying we'd be out of it soon, and we did come out of it at last late on the second day, following a stream up to its spring on an open, grassy hillside. As we sat luxuriating in the soft grass and the clear twilight, a line of deer came walking past not twenty feet away downhill; they glanced at us unconcerned and walked on quietly, one after the other, flicking their big ears to and fro. Venne quietly took up his bow and fitted an arrow. There was no sound but the twang of the bowstring, like the sound of a big beetle's wings. The last deer in line started, went down on its knees, and then lay down, all in that peaceful silence. The others never turned, but walked on into the woods.

"Ah, why'd I do that," Venne said. "Now we've got to clean it."

But that was soon done, and we were glad to have fresh meat that night and for the next day. As we sat, well fed, by the coals of our fire, Chamry

said, “If this was the Uplands I’d have said you called those deer.”

“Called ’em?”

“It’s a gift—calling animals to come. A brantor goes out hunting, well, he takes a caller with him, if he hasn’t the gift himself. Boar, or elk, or deer, whatever they’re after, they’ll come to the caller.”

“I can’t do that,” Venne said after a while in his low voice. “But I can see how it might be. If I know the land, I know pretty much, most times, where the deer are. As they know where I am. And if they’re afraid, I’ll never see them. But if they’re not afraid, they’ll come. They show themselves—‘Here I am, you wanted me.’ They give themselves. A man who doesn’t know that has no business hunting. He’s only a butcher.”

We went on for two days more through rolling, open woods before we came to a good-sized stream. “Across that is Barna’s country,” said Chamry. “And we’d best stay on the path and make noise, let them know we’re here, lest they think we’re sneaking in to spy.” So we came crashing into Barna’s lands like a herd of wild pigs, as Venne said. We came on a path and followed it, still talking loudly. Soon enough there was a shout to halt and hold still. We did that. Two men came striding down the path to meet us. One was tall and thin, one was short and broad-bellied.

“Do you know where you are?” said the short one, false-jovial, not quite menacing. The tall one held his crossbow loaded, though not aimed.

“In the Heart of the Forest,” said Chamry. “Seeking a welcome, Toma. You don’t remember me?”

“Well, by the Destroyer! The bad penny always turns up!” Toma came forward to take Chamry by one shoulder and shake him back and forth with aggressive welcome. “You Upland rat,” he said. “You vermin. Crawled off at night you did, with Brigin and that lot. What did you want to go with them for?”

“It was a mistake, Toma,” said Chamry, getting his footing so Toma could go on shaking him. “Call it a mistake and forgive it, eh?”

“Why not? Won’t be the last thing I forgive you, Chamry Bern.” He let him go at last. “What have you brought with you there? Baby rats, are they?”

“All I took away with me was those pigheads Brigin and his brother,” Chamry said, “and what I’m bringing back with me is two pearls, pearls set in gold for the ears of Barna. Venne, here, who can drop a deer at a

thousand paces, and Gav, here, who can tell tales and poetry to make you weep one moment and laugh the next. Take us into the Heart of the Forest, Toma!”

So we went on a mile or so through the forest of oak and alder, and came to that strange place.

The Heart of the Forest was a town, with kitchen gardens and barns and byres and corrals outside the palisade walls, and inside them houses and halls, streets and squares—all of wood. Towns and cities were built of stone and brick, I thought; only barns for cattle and huts for slaves were built of wood. But this was a city of wood. It was swarming with people, men, and women too, and children—everywhere, in the gardens, in the streets. I looked at the women and children with wonder, I looked at the cross-beamed, gable-roofed houses with awe. I looked at the broad central square full of people and stopped, scared. Venne was walking right next to me, pressed up against my shoulder for courage. “I never saw nothing like this, Gav,” he said hoarsely. We followed as close behind Chamry as two little kids behind the she-goat.

Chamry himself was looking about with some amazement. “It wasn’t half this size when I left,” he said. “Look how they’ve built!”

“You’re in luck,” said Toma, our fat guide. “There’s himself.”

Coming across the square towards us was a big, bearded man. Very tall, broad-chested, ample in girth, with dark reddish curly hair and a beard that covered all his cheeks and chin and chest, with large, clear eyes, and a singularly upright, buoyant walk, as if he were borne up a little above the ground—as soon as you saw him you knew he was, as Toma said, himself. He was looking at us with a pleasant, keen curiosity.

“Barna!” Chamry said. “Will you have me back, if I bring you a couple of choice recruits?” Chamry did not quite reverence Barna, but his posture was respectful, despite his jaunty tone. “I’m Chamry Bern of Bernmant, who made the mistake of going off south a few years back.”

“The Uplander,” Barna said, and smiled. He had a broad white smile that flashed in his beard, and a magnificently deep voice. “Oh, you’re welcome back for yourself, man. We’re free to come and free to go here!” He took Chamry’s hand and shook it. “And the lads?”

Chamry introduced us, with a few words about our talents. Barna patted Venne’s shoulder and told him a hunter was always welcome in the Heart

of the Forest; at me he looked intently for a minute, and said, “Come see me later today, Gav, if you will. Toma, you’ll find them quarters? Good, good, good! Welcome to freedom, lads!” And he strode on, a head taller than anyone else.

Chamry was beaming. “By the Stone!” he said. “Never a hard word, but welcome back and all’s forgiven! That’s a great man, with a great heart in him!”

We found lodgings in a barrack that seemed luxurious after our ill-built, smoky huts in the forest camp, and ate at the commons, which was open all day to all comers. There Chamry got his heart’s desire: they’d roasted a couple of sheep, and he ate roast mutton till his eyes gleamed with satisfaction above his cheeks shining with mutton fat. After that he took me to Barna’s house, which loomed over the central square, but did not go in with me. “I won’t press my luck,” he said. “He asked you to come, not me. Sing him that song of yours, ‘Liberty,’ eh? That’ll win him.”

So I went in, trying to act as if I wasn’t daunted, and said to the people that Barna had asked me to come. They were all men, but I heard women’s voices farther in the house. That sound, the sound of women’s voices in other rooms of a great house, made my mind stir strangely. I wanted to stop and listen. There was a voice I wanted to hear.

But I had to follow the men who took me to a hall with a big hearth, though there was no fire in it now. There Barna was sitting in a chair big enough for him, a regular throne, talking and laughing with both men and women. The women wore beautiful clothes, of such colors as I had not seen for months and months except in a flower or the dawn sky. You will laugh, but it was the colors I stared at, not the women. Some of the men were well dressed, too, and it was pleasant to see men clean, in handsome clothing, talking and laughing aloud. It was familiar.

“Come here, lad,” said Barna in his deep, grand voice. “Gav, is it? Are you from Casicar, Gav, or Asion?”

Now, in Brigin’s camp you never asked a man where he was from. Among runaway slaves, deserters, and wanted thieves, the question wasn’t well received. Chamry was the only one of us who often talked freely about where he’d run from, and that was because he was so far away from it. Not long ago we’d heard of raids into the forest, slave takers looking for runaways. For all of us it was better to have no past at all, which just

suited me. I was so taken aback by Barna's question that I answered it stiffly and uneasily, sounding even to myself as if I were lying. "I'm from Etra."

"Etra, is it? Well, I know a city man when I see one. I was born in Asion myself, a slave son of slaves. As you see, I've brought the city into the forest. What's the good of freedom if you're poor, hungry, dirty, and cold? That's no freedom worth having! If a man wants to live by the bow or by the work of his hands, let him take his choice, but here in our realm no man will live in slavery or in want. That's the beginning and the end of the Law of Barna. Right?" he asked the people around him, laughing, and they shouted back, "Right!"

The energy and goodwill of the man, his pure enjoyment in being, were irresistible. He embraced us all in his warmth and strength. He was keen, too; his clear eyes saw quick and deep. He looked at me and said, "You were a house slave, and pretty well treated, right? So was I. What were you trained to do in the great house for your masters?"

"I was educated to teach the children of the house." I spoke slowly. It was like reading a story in my mind. I was talking about somebody else.

Barna leaned forward, intensely interested. "Educated!" he said. "Writing, reading—all such?"

"Yes."

"Chamry said you were a singer?"

"A speaker," I said.

"A speaker. What do you speak?"

"Anything I've read," I said, not as a boast, but because it was true.

"What have you read?"

"The historians, the philosophers, the poets."

"A learned man. By the Deaf One! A learned man! A scholar! Lord Luck has sent me the man I wanted, the man I lacked!" Barna stared at me with amazed delight, then got up from his huge chair, came to me, and took me into a bear hug. My face was mashed into his curling beard. He squeezed the breath out of me, then held me out at arm's length.

"You will live here," he said. "Right? Give him a room, Diero! And tonight, will you speak for us tonight? Will you say us a piece of your learning, Gav-dí the Scholar? Eh?"

I said I would.

“There’s no books for you here,” he said almost anxiously, still holding me by the shoulders. “Everything else a man might need we have, but books—books aren’t what most of my men would bring here with them, they’re ignorant letterless louts, and books are very heavy matters—” He laughed, throwing back his head. “Ah, but now, from now on, we’ll remedy that. We’ll see to it. Tonight, then!”

He let me go. A woman in delicate black and violet robes took me by the hand and led me off. I thought her old, over forty surely, and she had a grave face, and did not smile; but her manner and her voice were gentle, and her dress beautiful, and it was amazing how differently she moved, and walked, and spoke, from how men did. She took me to a loft room, apologising for its being upstairs and small. I stammered something about staying with my mates in the barrack. She said, “You can live there, of course, if you wish, but Barna hopes you will honor his house.” I was unable to disappoint this elegant, fragile person. It seemed everybody was taking my learning very much on trust, but I couldn’t say that.

She left me in the little loft room. It had a small, square window, a bed with a mattress and bedding, a table and chair, an oil lamp. It looked like heaven to me. I did go back to the barrack, but Chamry and Venne had both gone out. I told a man who was lounging on his bunk there to tell them that I’d be staying at Barna’s house. He looked at me at first disbelieving, then with a knowing smirk.

“Living high, eh?” he said.

I put what little gear I had with Chamry’s, for I wouldn’t need fish hooks or my filthy old blanket; but I wore my sheathed knife on my belt, having seen that most men here did. I went back to Barna’s house. I could look at it better now that I was not so overawed. Its facade on the central square was wide and high, with mighty beams and deep gables; it was built of wood, and there was no glass in the small-paned windows, but it was an impressive house.

I sat on the bed in my room—my own room!—and let bewildered excitement flood through me. I was very nervous about reciting to this genial, willful, unpredictable giant and his crowd of people. I felt I must prove myself at once and beyond doubt to be the scholar he wanted me to be. That was a strange thing to be called on to do. Coming out of the silence I’d lived in so long, the silence of the forest, the mute

forgetfulness . . . But I had recited all *Sentas* to my companions in the silence, hadn't I? I had called on it, and it came to me. It was mine, it was in me. I remembered all I had learned in the schoolroom with—

I came too near the wall. My mind went numb. Blank, empty.

I lay back and dozed, I think, till the light was growing reddish in the small, deep-framed window. I got up and combed my hair as well as I could with my fingers and tied it back again with an end of fishing line, for it hadn't been cut for a year. That was all I could do to make myself elegant. I went down the stairs and to the great hall, where thirty or forty people were gathered, chattering like a flock of starlings.

I was made welcome, and the grave, sweet-mannered woman in black and violet, Diero, gave me a cup of wine, which I drank thirstily. It made my head spin. I didn't have the courage to keep her from refilling the cup, but I did have the wits not to drink any more. I looked at the cup, thin silver chased with a pattern of olive leaves, as beautiful as anything in . . . as anything I had seen. I wondered if there were silversmiths in the Heart of the Forest, and where the silver came from. Then Barna loomed over me, his grand voice rumbling. He put his arm round my shoulders. He took me in front of the people, called for silence, told his guests he had a treat for them, and nodded at me with a smile.

I wished I had a lyre, as strolling tellers did, to set the tone and mood of their recitation. I had to start off into silence, which is hard. But I had been trained well. Stand straight, Gavir, keep your hands still, bring your voice up from your belly, out from your chest . . .

I spoke them the old poem *The Sea-Farers of Asion*. It had come into my head tonight because Barna said he was from that city. And I hoped it might suit the company I was in. It is the tale of a ship carrying treasure up the coast from Ansul to Asion. The ship is boarded by pirates, who kill the officers and order the slaves at the oars to row to Sova Island, the pirates' haven. The oarsmen obey, but in the night they plot an uprising, unfasten their chains, and kill the pirates. Then they row the ship with all its treasure on to the port of Asion, where the Lords of the City welcome them as heroes and reward them with a share of the treasure and their freedom. The poem has a swing to it like the sea waves, and I saw my audience in their fine clothes following the story with open eyes and mouths, just like my ragged brothers in the smoky hut. I was borne up on

the words and on their attention. We were all there in the ship in the great grey sea.

So it ended, and after the little silence that comes then, Barna rose up with a roar—"Set them free! By Sampa the Maker and Destroyer, they set them free! Now there's a tale I like!" He gave me one of his bear hugs and held me off by the shoulders as his way was, saying, "Though I doubt that it's a true history. Gratitude to a lot of galley slaves? Not likely! Here, I'll tell you a better ending for it, Scholar: They never sailed back to Asion at all, but sailed south, far south, back to Ansul where the money came from, and there they shared it out and lived on it the rest of their lives, free men and rich!—How's that?—But it's good poetry, grand poetry well spoken!" He clapped me on the back and took me around introducing me to the others, men and women, who praised me and spoke kindly. I drank off my wine and my head went round again. It was very pleasant, but at last I was glad to get away, go up to my loft in amazement at all that had happened this long day, fall onto my soft bed, and sleep.

So began my life in the Heart of the Forest and my acquaintance with its founder and presiding spirit. All I could think was that Luck was with me still, and since I didn't know what to ask him for, he'd given me what I needed.

Barna's welcome to me hadn't been just jovial bluster; there was a bit of that in most of what he said and did, but under it was a driving purpose. He had wanted men of learning in his city of the free, and had none.

He took me into his confidence very quickly. Like me, he'd grown up a slave in a great house where the masters and some of the slaves were educated and there were books to be read. More than that, scholars who came to Asion visited and talked with the learned men of the house; poets stayed there, and the philosopher Denneter lived there for a year. All this had fascinated and impressed the boy, and he in turn had impressed his masters and the visitors with his quickness at learning, especially philosophy. Denneter made much of him, wanted to make a disciple of him; he was to be Denneter's student and go traveling with him through the world.

But when he was fifteen, the slaves in the great civic barracks of Asion rebelled. They broke into the armory of the city guard, used the armory as a fortress, and killed the guards and others who tried to assault them. They

declared themselves free men, demanded that the city recognise them as such, and called on all slaves to join them. Many house slaves did, and for several days Asion was in a state of panic and confusion. A regiment of Asion's army was sent into the city, the armory was besieged and taken, and the rebels slaughtered. Almost all male slaves were suspect after that. Many were branded to mark them indelibly as unfree. Barna, a boy of fifteen, had escaped branding, but there was no more talk of philosophy and travel. He was drafted to refill the civic barracks, sent to hard labor.

"And so all my education stopped then and there. Not a book have I held in my hands since that day. But I had those few years of learning, and hearing truly wise men talk, and knowing that there's a life of the mind that's far above anything else in the world. And so I knew what was missing here. I could make my city of free men, but what's the good of freedom to the ignorant? What's freedom itself but the power of the mind to learn what it needs and think what it likes? Ah, even if your body's chained, if you have the thoughts of the philosophers and the words of the poets in your head, you can be free of your chains, and walk among the great!"

His praise of learning moved me deeply. I had been living among people so poor that knowledge of anything much beyond their poverty had no meaning to them, and so they judged it useless. I had accepted their judgment, because I had accepted their poverty. There had been a long time when I'd never thought of the words of the makers; and when they came back to me, at Brigin's camp, it seemed a miraculous gift that had nothing to do with my will or intention. Having been so poor, so ignorant myself, I had no heart to say that ignorance cannot judge knowledge.

But here was a man who had proved his intelligence, energy, and courage, raising himself out of poverty and slavery to a kind of kingship, and bringing a whole people with him into independence; and he set knowledge, learning, and poetry above even such achievements. I was ashamed of my weakness, and rejoiced in his strength.

Admiring Barna more as I came to know him, I wanted to be of use to him. But for the time being it seemed all he wanted of me was to be a kind of disciple, going about the city with him and listening to his thoughts—which I was happy to do—and then, in the evening, to recite whatever poetry or tales I wished to his guests and household. I suggested teaching

some of his companions to read, but there were no books, he said, to teach from, and though I offered to, he wouldn't let me waste my time writing out copybooks. Books would be looked for and brought here, he said, and men of education would be found to assist me, and then we'd have a regular school, where all could learn who wanted.

Meanwhile some of Barna's people coaxed me to teach them, young women who lived in his house seeking a new entertainment; and with his permission I held a little class in writing and reading for a few of them. Barna laughed at me and the girls. "Don't let 'em fool you, Scholar. They're not after literature! They just want to sit next to a bit of pretty boy-flesh." He and his men companions teased the girls about turning into bookworms, and they soon gave it up. Diero was the only one who came more than a few times.

Diero was a beautiful woman, gracious and gentle. She had been trained from girlhood as a "butterfly woman." The "butterflies" of Asion—an ancient city famous for its ceremony, its luxury, and its women—were schooled in a science of pleasure far more refined and elaborate than anything known in the City States.

But, as Diero herself told me, reading wasn't one of the arts taught to the "butterflies." She listened with yearning intensity to the poetry I spoke, and had a great, timid curiosity about it. I encouraged her to let me teach her to write her letters and spell out words. She was humble, self-distrustful, but quick to learn, and her pleasure in learning was a pleasure to me. Barna looked on our lessons with genial amusement.

His older companions, all of whom had been with him for years, were very much his men. They had brought from their years of slavery a habit of accepting orders and not competing to lead, which made them easy company. They treated me as a boy, not a rival to them, telling me what I needed to know and occasionally giving me a warning. Barna would give you the coat off his back, they told me, but if he thinks you're poaching his girls, look out! They told me Diero had come with Barna from Asion when he first broke free and had been his mistress for many years. She wasn't that now, but she was the woman of Barna's House, and a man who didn't treat Diero with affectionate respect wouldn't be welcome there.

Barna explained to me one day as we sat up on the watchtower of the Heart of the Forest that men and women should be free to love one another

with no hypocritical bonds of promised faithfulness to chain them together. That sounded good to me. All I knew of marriage was that it was for the masters, not for my kind, so I'd thought little about it one way or the other. But Barna thought about such things, and came to conclusions, and had them enacted in the Heart of the Forest. He had ideas about children, too, that they should be entirely free, never punished, allowed to run about as they pleased and find out for themselves what best suited them to do. This seemed admirable to me. All his ideas did.

I was a good listener, sometimes putting a question, but mostly content to follow the endless inventions and generous vistas of his mind. As he said, he thought best out loud. He soon claimed me as a necessity to him: "Where's Gav-dí? Where's the Scholar? I need to think!"

I lived at Barna's house, but I went to see Chamry often. He had joined the cobblers' guild, where he lived snug and complained of nothing but the scarcity of women and roast mutton. "They've got to send the tithing boys out for roasting mutton!" he said.

Venne had soon found that as a hunter he'd have to spend most of his time away off in the woods just as he'd done for Brigin, since all the game near the Heart of the Forest had long since been hunted out. Hunting was not what fed the town these days. One of the groups of "tithing boys" asked him to come with them as a guard when they found what a good shot he was with the short bow, and he joined them. He first went out on the road with them about a month after we came to the Heart of the Forest.

The tithers or raiders went out from our wooden city to meet drovers and wagons on the roads outside the forest. Their goal was to bring back flocks and herds, loaded wagons, drivers and horses, thus increasing our stock of food, vehicles, animals, and men—if the men were willing to join the Brotherhood. If they weren't, Barna told me, they were left blindfolded with their hands tied, to wander in hope the next passerby would untie them. He laughed his mighty laugh when he told me that some of the drivers had been robbed so often by the Forest Brothers that they meekly stuck their hands out to be tied.

There were also the "netmen" who went singly or in pairs into Asion itself, sometimes to bargain in the market for things we needed, but sometimes as thieves to steal from the houses of the rich and the coffers of wealthy shrines. No money was used among us, but the Brotherhood

wanted cash to buy things the raiders could not steal—including the goodwill of towns near the forest, and the silence of colluding merchants in the cities. Barna liked to boast that he sat on a fortune that the great merchants of Asion might envy. Where the gold and silver was kept I never knew. Bronze and copper coins were to be had for the asking by anyone going into a town to buy goods.

Barna and his assistants knew who left the Heart of the Forest. Not many did, and only tried and trusted men. As Barna put it, one fool blabbing in an alehouse might bring the army of Asion down on us. The narrow, intricate woodland paths that led to and from the gate were closely guarded and often changed and obliterated, so that the tracks of wagons or herds of cattle couldn't easily lead anyone to the wooden city. I remembered the sentries we had met, the challenge and the loaded crossbow. We all knew that if a trail guard saw anyone going away from the gate without permission, he was not to challenge, but to shoot.

They asked Venne to be a trail guard, but he didn't like the idea of having to shoot a man in the back. Raiding wagon trains or rustling cattle suited him better, and being a raider gave a man great prestige among the Brothers. Barna himself said the raiders and the "justicers" who policed the town were the most valuable members of the community. And every man in the Heart of the Forest should follow his own heart in choosing what he did. So Venne went off cheerily with a band of young men, promising Chamry he'd come back with "a flock of sheep, or failing that, a batch of women."

In fact there weren't many women in the Heart of the Forest, and every one of them was jealously guarded by a man or group of men. Those you saw in the streets and gardens seemed all to be pregnant or dragging a gaggle of infants with them, or else they were mere bowed backs sweeping, spinning, digging, milking, like old women slaves anywhere. There were more young women in Barna's house than anywhere else, the prettiest girls in the town, and the merriest. They dressed in fine clothes the raiders brought in. If they could sing or dance or play the lyre, that was welcome, but they weren't expected to do any work. They were, Barna said, "to be all a woman should be—free, and beautiful, and kind."

He loved to have them about him, and they all flirted and flattered and teased him assiduously. He joked and played with them, but his serious

talk was always with men.

As time went on, and he kept me his almost constant companion, I felt the honor and the burden of his trust. I tried to be worthy of it. I continued to recite in the evening in his great hall for all who wanted to hear; and because of that and because Barna had me with him so often, most people treated me with respect, though it was often begrudged or puzzled or patronising, since I was after all still a boy. And some of them saw me, I know, as a kind of learned halfwit. They sensed that there was something lacking in me, that for all the endless words at my command, my knowledge of the world was slight and shallow, like a child's.

I knew that too, but I could not think about it or why it should be so. I turned away from such thoughts, and went about with Barna, following him, needing him. His great fullness of being filled my emptiness.

I wasn't the only one who felt that. Barna was the heart of the Heart of the Forest. His vision, his decision, was always the point of reference for the others, his will was their fulcrum. He didn't maintain this mastery by intimidation but through the superiority of his energy and intelligence and the tremendous generosity of his nature: he was simply there before the others, seeing what must be done and how to do it, drawing them to act with him through his passion, activity, and goodwill. He loved people, loved to be among them, with them, he believed in brotherhood with all his heart and soul.

I knew his dreams by now, for he told them to me as we went about the city, he directing, encouraging, and participating in work, I as his listening shadow.

I couldn't always share his love for the Forest Brothers, and wondered how he could keep any patience at all with some of them. Lodging, food, all the necessities of life were shared as fairly as possible, but it had to be rough justice, and one room will always be bigger than another, one serving of pie will have more raisins than another. The first response of many of the men to any perceived inequity was to accuse another man of hogging, and fight their grudge out with fists or knives. Most of them had been farm or hard-labor slaves, brutalised from childhood, used to getting what little they got by grabbing for it and fighting to keep it. Barna had lived that life too and understood them. He kept the rules very simple and very strict, and his justicers enforced them implacably. But still there were

murders now and then, and brawls every night. Our few healers, bonesetters, and tooth pullers worked hard. The ale made by our brewery was kept weak at Barna's orders, but men could get drunk on it if they had a weak head or drank all night. And when they weren't drunk and quarreling they were complaining of unfairness, injustice, or the work they were allotted; they wanted less of it, or to do a different kind of work, or to work with one group of mates not another, and so on endlessly. All these complaints ended up with Barna.

"Men have to learn how to be free," he said to me. "Being a slave is easy. To be a free man you have to use your head, you have to give here and take there, you have to give your orders to yourself. They'll learn, Gav, they'll learn!" But even his large good nature was exasperated by the demands on him to settle petty jealousies, and he could be angered by the backbiting and rivalry of the men closest to him, his justicers and the men of his household—our government, in fact, though they had no titles.

He had no title himself, he was simply Barna.

He chose his men, and they chose others to assist them, always with his approval. Election by popular vote was an idea which he knew little about. I was able to tell him that some of the City States had at one time or another been republics or even democracies, although of course only freeborn men of property had the vote. I remembered what I had read of the state and city of Ansul, far to the south, which was governed by officials elected by the entire people, and had no slavery, until they were themselves enslaved by a warlike people from the eastern deserts. And the great country of Urdile, north of Bendile, did not permit any form of bondage; like Ansul, they considered both men and women to be citizens; and every citizen had the vote, electing governing consuls for two years and senators for six. I could tell Barna of these different polities, and he listened with interest, and added elements from them to his plans for the ultimate government of the Free State in the forest.

Such plans were his favorite topic when he was in his good mood. When the bickering and brawling and backbiting and the innumerable, interminable details of provisioning and guard duty and building and everything else that he took responsibility for wore him out and put him in a darker mood, he talked of revolution—the Uprising.

“In Asion there are three slaves, or four, for every free man. All over Bendile, the men who work the farms are slaves. If they could see who they are—that nothing can be done without them! If they could see how many they are! If they could realise their strength, and hold together! The Armory Rebellion, back twenty-five years ago, was just an outburst. No plan, no real leaders. Weapons, but no decisions. Nowhere to go. They couldn’t hold together. What I’m planning here is going to be entirely different. There are two essential elements. First, weapons—the weapons we’re stockpiling here, now. We’ll be met with violence, and we must be able to meet it with insuperable strength. —And then, union. We must act as one. The Uprising must happen everywhere at once. In the city, in the countryside, the towns and villages, the farms. A network of men, in touch with one another, ready, informed, with weapons at hand, each knowing when and how to act—so that when the first torch is lighted the whole country will go up in flames. The fire of freedom! What’s that song of yours? ‘Be our fire . . . Liberty!’ ”

His talk of the Uprising disturbed and fascinated me. Without really understanding what was at stake, I liked to hear him make his plans, and would ask him for details. He’d catch fire then and talk with great passion. He said, “You bring me back to my heart, Gav. Trying to keep things running here has been eating me up. I’ve been looking only at what’s to be done next and forgetting why we’re doing it. I came here to build a stronghold where men and arms could be gathered, a center from which men would go back, a network of men in the northern City States and Bendile, working to get all the slaves in Asion with us, and in Casicar, and the countryside. To get them ready for the Uprising, so that when it comes there’ll be nowhere for the masters to fall back to. They’ll bring out their armies, but who will the armies attack—with the masters held hostage in their own houses and farms, and the city itself in the hands of slaves? In every house in the city, the masters will be penned up in the barrack, the way they penned us in when there was threat of war, right?—but now it’s the masters locked up while the slaves run the household, as of course they always did, and keep the markets going, and govern the city. In the towns and the countryside, the same thing, the masters locked up tight, the slaves taking over, doing the work they always did, the only difference is they give the orders . . . So the army comes to attack, but if they attack, the first

to die will be the hostages, the masters, squealing for mercy, *Don't let them slaughter us! Don't attack, don't attack!* The general thinks, ah, they're nothing but slaves with pitchforks and kitchen knives, they'll run as soon as we move in, and he sends in a troop to take the farm. They're cut to pieces by slaves armed with swords and crossbows, fighting from ambush, trained men fighting on their own ground. They take no prisoners. And they bring out one of the squealing masters, the Father maybe, where the soldiers can see, and say: *You attacked: he dies*, and slice off his head. *Attack again, more of them die*. And this will be going on all over the country—every farm, village, town, and Asion itself—the great Uprising! And it won't end until the masters buy their liberty with every penny they have, and everything they own. Then they can come outside and learn out how the common folk live."

He threw his head back and laughed, merrier than I'd seen him in days. "Oh, you do me good, Gav!" he said.

The picture he drew was fantastic yet terribly vivid, compelling my belief. "But how will you reach the farm slaves, the city house slaves?" I asked, trying to sound practical, knowledgeable.

"That's the strategy: exactly. To reach into the houses, into the barracks and the slave villages, send men to talk to them—catch them in our net! Show them what they can do and how to do it. Let them ask questions. Get them to figure it out for themselves, make their own plans—so long as they know they must wait for our signal. It'll take time to do that, to spread the net, set up the plan all through the city and the countryside. And yet it can't be too slow in building, because if it goes on too long, word will leak out, fools will begin to blab, and the masters will get jumpy—*What's all this talk in the barrack? What are they whispering in the kitchen? What's that blacksmith making there?*— And then the great advantage of surprise is lost. Timing is everything."

It was only a tale to me, his Uprising. In his mind it was to take place in the future, a great revenge, a rectification of the past. But in my mind there was no past.

I had nothing left but words—the poems that sang themselves in my head, the stories and histories I could bring before my mind's eye and read. I did not look up from the words to what had been around them. When I looked away from them I was back in the vivid intensity of the

moment, now, here, with nothing behind it, no shadows, no memories. The words came when I needed them. They came to me from nowhere. My name was a word. Etra was a word. That was all; they had no meaning, no history. Liberty was a word in a poem. A beautiful word, and beauty was all the meaning it had.

Always sketching out his plans and dreams of the future, Barna never asked me about my past. Instead, one day, he told me about it. He'd been talking about the Uprising, and perhaps I'd answered without much enthusiasm, for my own sense of emptiness sometimes made it hard for me to respond convincingly. He was quick to see such moods.

"You did the right thing, you know, Gav," he said, looking at me with his clear eyes. "I know what you're thinking about. Back there in the city . . . You think, 'What a fool I was! To run off and starve, to live in a forest with ignorant men, to slave harder than I ever did in my masters' house! Is that freedom? Wasn't I freer there, talking with learned men, reading the books of the poets, sleeping soft and waking warm? Wasn't I happier there?' —But you weren't. You weren't happy, Gav. You knew it in your heart, and that's why you ran off. The hand of the master was always on you."

He sighed and looked into the fire for a little; it was autumn, a chill in the air. I listened to him as I listened to him tell all his tales, without argument or question.

"I know how it was, Gav. You were a slave in a great house, a rich house, in the city, with kind masters who had you educated. Oh, I know that! And you thought you should be happy, because you had the power to learn, read, teach—become a wise man, a learned man. They let you have that. They allowed it to you. Oh yes! But though you were given the power *to do* certain things, you had no power *over* anyone or anything. That was theirs. The masters. Your owners. And whether you knew it or not, in every bone of your body and fiber of your mind you felt that hand of the master holding you, controlling you, pressing down on you. Any power you had, on those terms, was worthless. Because it was nothing but their power acting through you. Using you . . . They let you pretend it was yours. You filched a bit of freedom, a scrap of liberty, from your masters, and pretended it was yours and was enough to keep you happy. Right? But you were growing into a man. And for a man, Gav, there is no happiness but in

his own freedom. His freedom to do what he wills to do. And so your will sought its full liberty. As mine did, long ago."

He reached out and clapped me on the knee. "Don't look so sad," he said, his white grin flashing in his curly beard. "You know you did the right thing! Be glad of it, as I am!"

I tried to tell him that I was glad of it.

He had to go see about affairs, and left me musing by the fire. What he said was true. It was the truth.

But not my truth.

Turning away from his tale, I looked back for the first time in—how long? I looked across the wall I'd built to keep me from remembering. I looked and saw the truth: I had been a slave in a great house, a rich house, in the city, obedient to my masters, owning no freedom but what they allowed me. And I had been happy.

In the house of my slavery I had known a love so dear to me that I could not bear to think about it, because when I lost it, I lost everything.

All my life had been built on trust, and that trust had been betrayed by the Family of Arcamand.

Arcamand: with the name, with the word, everything I had forgotten, had refused to remember, came back and was mine again, and with it all the unspeakable pain I had denied.

I sat there by the fire, turned away from the room, bent over, my hands clenched on my knees. Someone came near and stood near me at the hearth to warm herself: Diero, a gentle presence in a long shawl of fine pale wool.

"Gav," she said very quietly, "what is it?"

I tried to answer her and broke into a sob. I hid my face in my arms and wept aloud.

Diero sat down beside me on the stone hearth seat. She put her arms around me and held me while I cried.

"Tell me, tell me," she said at last.

"My sister. She was my sister," I said.

And that word brought the sobbing again, so hard I could not take breath.

She held me and rocked me a while, until I could lift my head and wipe my nose and face. Then she said again, "Tell me."

“She was always there,” I said.

And so one way and another, weeping, in broken sentences and out of order, I told her about Sallo, about our life, about her death.

The wall of forgetting was down. I was able to think, to speak, to remember. I was free. Freedom was unspeakable anguish.

In that first terrible hour I came back again and again to Sallo’s death, to how she died, why she died—all the questions I had refused to ask.

“The Mother knew—she had to know about it,” I said. “Maybe Torm took Sallo and Ris out of the silk rooms without asking, without permission, it sounds as if that’s what he did. But the other women there would know it—they’d go to the Mother and tell her—*Torm-dí took Ris and Sallo off, Mother—they didn’t want to go, they were crying— Did you tell him he could take them? Will you send after them?—* And she didn’t. She did nothing! Maybe the Father said not to interfere. He always favored Torm. Sallo said that, she said he hated Yaven and favored Torm. But the Mother—she knew—she knew where Torm and Hoby were taking them, to that place, those men, men who used girls like animals, who— She knew that. Ris was a virgin. And the Mother had given Sallo to Yaven herself. And yet she let the other son take her and give her to— How did they kill her? Did she try to fight them? She couldn’t have. All those men. They raped her, they tortured her, that’s what they wanted girls for, to hear them scream—to torture and kill them, drown them— When Sallo was dead. After I saw her. I saw her dead. The Mother sent for me. She called her ‘our sweet Sallo.’ She gave me—she gave me money—for my sister—”

A sound came out of my throat then, not a sob but a hoarse howl. Diero held me close. She said nothing.

I was silent at last. I was mortally tired.

“They betrayed our trust,” I said.

I felt Diero nod. She sat beside me, her hand on mine.

“That’s what it is,” she said, almost inaudibly. “Do you keep the trust, or not. To Barna it’s all power. But it’s not. It’s trust.”

“They had the power to betray it,” I said bitterly.

“Even slaves have that power,” she said in her gentle voice.

Chapter 10

FOR DAYS after that I kept to my room. Diero told Barna I was ill. I was sick indeed with the grief and anger that I hadn't been able to feel all the uncounted months since I walked away from the graveyard by the Nisas. I had run away then, body and soul. Now at last I'd turned around and stopped running. But I had a long, long way to go back.

I could not go back to Arcamand in my body, though I thought often and often of doing so. But I had run away from Sallo, from all my memory of her, and I had to return to her and let her return to me. I could no longer deny her, my love, my sister, my ghost.

To grieve for her brought me relief, but never for long. Always the pure sorrow became choked thick with anger, bitter blame, self-blame, unforgiving hatred. With Sallo they all came back to me, those faces, voices, bodies I had kept away from me so long, hiding them behind the wall. Often I could not think of Sallo at all but only of Torm, his thick body and lurching walk; of the Mother and the Father of Arca; or of Hoby. Hoby who had pushed Sallo into the chariot while she was crying out for help. Hoby the bastard son of the Father, full of rancorous envy, hating me and Sallo above all. Hoby who had nearly drowned me once. They might have let— At that pool— It might have been Hoby who—

I crouched on the floor of my room, stuffing the folds of a cloak into my mouth so that no one could hear me scream.

Diero came up to my room once or twice a day, and though I couldn't bear to have anyone else see me as I was, she brought me no shame, but even a little dignity. There was in her a bleak, gentle, unmoved calm, which I could share while she was with me. I loved her for that, and was grateful to her.

She made me eat a little and look after myself. She was able to make me think, sometimes, that I had come to this despair in order to find a way

through it, a way back to life.

When at last I went downstairs again, it was with her to give me courage.

Barna, having been told I'd had a fever, treated me kindly, and told me I mustn't recite again till I was perfectly well. So though my days were again mostly spent with him, often in the winter evenings I'd go to Diero's peaceful rooms and sit and talk with her alone. I looked forward to those hours and cherished them afterwards, thinking of her greeting and her smile and her soft movements, which were professional and mannered like those of an actor or dancer, and yet which expressed her true nature. I knew she welcomed my visits and our quiet talk. Diero and I loved each other, though she never held me in her arms but that once, by the great hearth, when she let me cry.

People joked about us, a little, carefully, looking at Barna to be sure he didn't take offense. He seemed if anything amused by the idea that his old mistress was consoling his young scholar. He made no jokes or allusions about it, an unusual delicacy in him; but then he always treated Diero with respect. She herself did not care what people thought or said.

As for me, if Barna thought she and I were lovers, it kept him from suspecting me of "poaching" his girls. Though they were so pretty and apparently so available as to drive a boy my age crazy, their availability was a sham, a trap, as men of the household had warned me early on. If he gives you one of the girls, they said, take her, but only for the night, and don't try sneaking off with any of his favorites! And as they knew me better and came to trust my discretion, they told me dire stories about Barna's jealousy. Finding a man with a girl he himself wanted, he had snapped the man's wrists like sticks, they said, and driven him out into the forest to starve.

I didn't entirely believe such tales. The men themselves might be a bit jealous of me, after all, and not sorry to scare me off the girls. Young as I was, some of the girls were even younger; and some of them were cautiously flirtatious, praising and petting me as their "Scholar-dí," begging me prettily to make my recital a love story "and make us cry, Gav, break our hearts!" For after a while I became their entertainer again. The words had come back to me.

During the first time of agony, when I regained all that I had cut out of my memory, all I could remember was Sallo, and Sallo's death, and all my life in Arcamand and Etra. For many days afterwards, I believed that that was all I ever would remember. I didn't want to remember anything I'd learned there, in the house of the murderers. All my treasure of history and verse and stories was stained with their crime. I didn't want to know what they'd taught me. I wanted nothing they had given me, nothing that belonged to the masters. I tried to push it all away from me, forget it, as I had forgotten them.

But that was foolish, and I knew it in my heart. Gradually the healing took place, seeming as it always does that it wasn't taking place. Little by little I let all I'd learned return to me, and it was not stained, not spoiled. It didn't belong to the masters, it wasn't theirs: it was mine. It was all I ever really had owned. So I stopped the effort to forget, and all my book learning came back to me with the clarity and completeness some people find uncanny, though the gift isn't that rare. Once again I could go into the schoolroom or the library of Arcamand in my mind, and open a book, and read it. Standing before the people in the high wooden hall, I could open my mouth and speak the first lines of a poem or a tale, and the rest would follow of itself, the poetry saying and singing itself through me, the story renewing itself in itself as a river runs.

Most of the people there believed that I was improvising, that I was the maker, the poet, incomprehensibly inspired to spout hexameters forever. There wasn't much point in arguing with them about it. People generally know better than the workman how the work is done, and tell him; and he might as well keep his opinions to himself.

There was little else in the way of entertainment in the Heart of the Forest. Some of the girls and a few men could play or sing. They and I always had a benevolent audience. Barna sat in his great chair, stroking his great curly beard, intent, delighted. Some who had little interest in the tales or the poetry attended either to win favor with Barna or simply because they wanted to be with him and share his pleasure.

And he still took me with him, talking about his plans. So talking and listening, and having leisure time and comfort in which to think—for thinking goes much quicker when one is warm, dry, and not hungry—I spent the end of that winter working through all I'd recovered when I came

back at last to my Sallo and could grieve for her, and know my loss, and look at what my life had been and what it might have been.

It was still hard for me to think at all of the Mother and Father of Arca. My mind would not come to any clarity concerning them. But I thought often of Yaven. I thought he would not have betrayed our trust. I wondered if when he came home, he had exacted vengeance, useless as it might be. Surely he would not forgive Torm and Hoby, however long he must withhold punishment. Yaven was a man of honor, and he had loved Sallo.

But Yaven might be dead, killed at the siege of Casicar. That war had been as much a disaster for Etra, so people said, as the siege of Etra had been for Casicar. Torm might now be the heir of Arca. That was a thought my mind still flinched away from.

I could think of Sotur only with piercing grief and pain. She had kept faith with us as best she could. Alone there, what had become of her? She would be, she probably had been, married off into some other household—one where there was no Everra, no library of books, no friendship, no escape.

Again and again I thought of that night when Sallo and I were talking in the library, and Sotur came in, and they tried to tell me why they were afraid. They had clung to each other, loving, helpless.

And I hadn't understood.

It was not only the Family who had betrayed them. I had betrayed them. Not in acts: what could I have done? But I should have understood. I had been unwilling to see. I had blinded my eyes with belief. I had believed that the rule of the master and the obedience of the slave were a mutual and sacred trust. I had believed that justice could exist in a society founded on injustice.

Belief in the lie is the life of the lie. That line from Caspro's book came back to me, and cut like a razor.

Honor can exist anywhere, love can exist anywhere, but justice can exist only among people who found their relationships upon it.

Now, I thought, I understood Barna's plans for the Uprising, now they made sense to me. All that ancient evil ordained by the Ancestors, that prison tower of mastery and slavery, was to be uprooted and thrown down, replaced by justice and liberty. The dream would be made real. And Luck

had brought me here to the place where that great change would begin, the home and center of the liberty to come.

I wanted to be one of those who made it real. I began to dream of going to Asion. Many of the Forest Brothers were from that city, a great city with a large population of freemen and freedmen, merchants and artisans, into which a fugitive slave could mix without being questioned or suspected. Barna's netmen went back and forth often, passing as traders, merchants, cattle buyers, slaves sent on commission by farmers, and so on. I wanted to join them. There were educated people in Asion, both nobles and freemen, people to whom I could present myself as a freeman seeking work copying or reciting or teaching. And so doing I could do Barna's work, laying the foundation of the Uprising among the slaves I would meet there.

Barna absolutely forbade it. "I want you here," he said. "I need you, Scholar!"

"You need me more there," I said.

He shook his head. "Too dangerous. One day they ask, where did you get your learning? And what'll you say?"

I'd already thought that out. "That I went to school in Mesun, where the University is, and came down to Asion because there are too many scholars in Urdile, and the pay's better in Bendile."

"There'd be scholars there from the University who'd say no, that boy was never there."

"Hundreds of people go to the colleges. They can't all know one another."

I argued hard, but he shook his big curly head, and his laugh changed to a grimmer look. "Listen, Gav, I tell you a learned man stands out. And you're already famous. The lads talk as they go about, you know, winning folk in the villages and towns to come here to join us. They boast of you. We've got a fellow, they say, that can speak any tale or poem that was ever made! And only a boy yet, a wonder of the world! Well, you can't go to Asion with a name like that hanging about you."

I stared at him. "My name? Do they say my name?"

"They say the name you gave us," he said, untroubled.

Of course he, and everyone else but Chamry Bern, assumed that "Gav" was a false name. Nobody here, not even Barna, used the name he'd had as

a slave.

As Barna saw my expression, his changed. “Oh, by the Destroyer,” he said. “You kept the name you had in Etra?”

I nodded.

“Well,” he said after a minute, “if you ever do leave, take a new one! But that’s all the more reason for me to say stay here! Your old masters may have sent word around that their clever slave boy they’d spent so much money educating ran off. They hate to let a runaway escape. It gripes them to the soul. We’re a good way from Etra here, but you never know.”

I’d never given a thought to pursuit. When I left the graveyard and walked up the Nisas, it was a death. I had walked away from everything, into nothing, going nowhere. I had no fear, then, because I had no desire. As I began to live again, here, I still had no fear. I’d gone so far in my own mind that it never occurred to me that anyone from the old life would follow me.

“They think I’m dead,” I said at last. “They think I drowned myself that morning.”

“Why would they think that?”

I was silent.

I hadn’t told Barna anything about my life. I’d never spoken of it to anyone but Diero.

“You left some clothing on the riverbank, eh?” he said. “Well, they might have fallen for that old trick. But you were a valuable property. If your owners think you might be alive, they’ll have their ears open. It’s been only a year or two, right? Don’t ever think you’re safe—except here! And you might tell the lads you came from Pagadi or Piram, so that they don’t say Etra if they speak of you, eh?”

“I will,” I said, humbled.

Had there been no end to my stupidity? No limit to the patience Luck had had with me?

But I did repeat my request to go into Asion. Barna said, “You’re a free man, Gav. I give you no orders! But I tell you, it’s not time yet for you to go. You wouldn’t be safe. Your being in Asion now could endanger others there, and the whole scheme of the Uprising. When the time comes for you to go there, I’ll tell you. Before then, if you go, you go against my heart.”

I couldn’t argue with that.

In early spring a couple of newcomers arrived, runaways from a household in Asion, who came hidden in a goods wagon driven by netmen. They brought with them, stolen from their masters' house, a good sum of money and a long box. "What's this stuff?" asked one of Barna's men who opened the box, holding up a scroll so that it slipped from the rod and unrolled at his feet. "Cloth, is it?"

"It's what I asked for, man," said Barna. "It's a book. Now take care with it!" He had indeed requested his netmen to bring books. Nobody had brought any until now, most of our recruits—and recruiters—being illiterate and having no idea where to look for books or even, like this fellow, what a book looked like.

The new pair of runaways were educated, one trained in accounting, the other in recitation. The books were a motley lot, some scrolls, some paged and bound; but all could be useful for teaching, and one was a treasure to me—a little, elegantly printed copy of Caspro's *Cosmologies*, replacing the manuscript copy that Mimen had given me, for which I had grieved, once I began to remember what I had lost and left at Arcamand.

The new recruits were, as Barna said, a good catch: the accountant assisted him in record keeping, and the reciter could tell fables and Bendili epics by the hour, giving me a vacation.

I looked forward to talking to these educated men, but that didn't go well. The accountant knew only figures and calculations, while the reciter, Pulter, made it clear that he was older and more accomplished than I was, and that my pretensions to scholarship didn't qualify me to converse with a truly learned man. It galled him that most of our people liked my recitations better than his, though he soon had a following. I'd been taught to let the words do the work, while he performed in alternate shouts and whispers, with long pauses, dramatic intonations, and quavering tremolos of emotion.

The copy of the *Cosmologies* was his, but he had no interest in reading Caspro, saying all the modern poets were obscure and perverse. He gave me the book, and for that alone I would have forgiven him all his snubs and all his quavers. I found the poem difficult, but kept going back to it. Sometimes I read from it to Diero, quiet afternoons in her room.

Her friendship was like nothing else in my life. Only with her could I speak of my life at Arcamand. When I was with her I felt no wish for

revenge, no desire to overturn the social order, no rage at the poor dead impotent Ancestors. I knew what I had lost, and could remember what I had had. Though Diero had never been in Etra, she was my link to it. She hadn't known Sallo, but she brought Sallo to me, and so eased my heart.

Like most slaves, Diero had been casually mothered and had no brother or sister that she knew; the two children she had borne when she was young were sold as infants. The craving for family relationship was deep in her, as it was in all of us. Barna knew that and called on it to form and strengthen his Brotherhood.

I was unusual in having had so close a bond to a sister: my loss was specific, my craving acute. It was as an older sister that I loved Diero, while to her I was a younger brother or a son, and also, perhaps, the one man she ever knew who did not want to be her master.

She loved to hear me tell about Sallo and the others at Arcamand, and our days at the farm; she was curious about the customs of Etra, and also about my origin. The great marshes where the Rassy rises lie not far south of Asion, and she had known me at once for what I was, one of the Marshmen, dark-skinned, short and slight, with thick black hair and a high-bridged nose. The Rassiu, she called the Marsh people. They came into Asion, she said, to trade at a certain monthly market; they brought herbs and medicines that were in high demand, and fine basketry and cloth they wove of reeds, to trade for pottery and metalware. They came under an ancient religious truce which protected them from slave takers. They were respected as freemen, and some of them had even settled in one quarter of the city. She was shocked to learn that Etra raided the marshes for slaves. "The Rassiu are a sacred people," she said. "They have a covenant with the Lord of the Waters. Your city will suffer for enslaving them, I think."

Some of the young women of Barna's house treated Diero with servility, fawning, as if she had the kind of power they'd known in woman slave owners. Others were trustfully respectful; others ignored her as they did all old women. She treated them all alike—kind, mild, yielding, with a dignity that set her apart. I think she was very lonely among them. Once I saw her talking with one of the younger girls, letting the girl talk and weep for home, as she had done for me.

There were no children in Barna’s house. When a girl got pregnant she moved to one of the houses where other women lived in the town and had her baby there; she kept it or gave it away as she chose. If she wanted to bring the baby up, that was fine, but if she wanted to come back and live the free life at Barna’s house, she couldn’t bring it with her. “This is where we get ’em, not where we keep ’em!” Barna said, to a shout of approval from his men.

Soon after Pulter and the accountant arrived, a new girl was brought to the household, with a little sister from whom she refused to be parted. Very beautiful, fifteen or sixteen years old, Irad had been taken from a village west of the forest. Barna was immediately smitten with her and made his claim on her clear to the other men. Whether she was already experienced with men or simply had no defenses, she submitted to everything with no pretense of resistance, until they told her she must let her little sister be taken away. Then she turned into a lion. I didn’t see the scene, but the other men told me about it. “If you touch her I’ll kill you,” she said, whipping out a thin, long, unexpected knife from the seam of her embroidered trousers, and glaring round at Barna and all of them.

Barna began to reason with her, explaining the rules of the household, and assuring her that the child would be well cared for. Irad stood silent, her knife held ready.

At this point, Diero interfered. She came forward and stood beside the sisters, putting her hand on the little girl’s head as she cowered against Irad. She asked Barna if the girls were slaves. I can imagine her mild, unemphatic voice asking the question.

He of course proclaimed that they were free women in the City of Freedom.

“So, if they like, both of them can stay with me,” said Diero.

The men who first told me the story thought that Diero had at last become jealous, Irad being so young and so beautiful. They laughed about it. “The old vixen has a tooth or two left!” one of them said.

I didn’t think it was jealousy that moved her. Diero was without envy or possessiveness. What had made her intervene this time?

She got her way, to the extent that she went off with the child that night to her rooms. Barna of course took Irad with him for the night. But

whenever he didn’t call for her, Irad stayed with little Melle in Diero’s rooms.

When the women of Barna’s house were all together, I was often daunted by the sheer power of their youthful femininity. I got my revenge as a male by feeling contempt for them. They were healthy, plump, mindless, content to lounge about the house all day trying on the latest stolen finery and chattering about nothing. If one or another of them went off to have a baby, it made no difference—there was no end of them, others just as young and pretty would arrive with the next convoy of raiders.

Now it occurred to me to wonder about this endless supply of girls. Were they all runaways? Did they all ask to come here? Were they all seeking freedom?

Yes, of course they were. They were escaping from masters who forced sex on them.

Was Barna’s house any better than whatever they’d escaped from?

Yes, of course it was. Here, they weren’t raped, they weren’t beaten. They were well fed, well clothed, idle.

Exactly like the women in the silk rooms at Arcamand.

I cringe, remembering how I cringed when that thought first came to me. I am ashamed now as I was then.

I thought I was keeping and cherishing Sallo in my memory, but I had forgotten her again, refused to see her, refused to see what her life and her death had shown me. I had run away again.

I had a hard time making myself go see Diero, then. For several nights I went into town to talk with Venne and Chamry and their friends. When I finally did visit Diero’s rooms, my shame kept me tongue-tied. Besides, the little girl was there. “Of course Irad is usually with Barna at night,” Diero said, “but then I get to sleep with Melle. And we tell stories, don’t we, Melle?”

The child nodded vigorously. She was about six years old, dark, and extremely small. She sat next to Diero and stared at me. When I looked back, she blinked, but went on staring. “Are you Cly?” she asked.

“No. I’m Gav.”

“Cly came to the village,” the child said. “He looked like a crow too.”

“My sister used to call me Beaky,” I said.

After a minute she looked down at last. She smiled. “Beaky-beaky,” she murmured.

“Her village is near the Marshes,” Diero said. “Maybe Cly came from there. Melle looks a bit like a Rassiu herself. Look, Gav, what Melle did this morning.” She showed me a scrap of the thin, stiffly sized canvas that we used for writing lessons, since we had almost no paper. On it a few letters were written in a large uncertain script.

“T, M, O, D,” I read out. “You wrote that, Melle?”

“I did like Diero-ío did,” the child said. She jumped up and brought me Diero’s scroll copybook, unrolled to the last few lines of poetry. “I just copied the big ones.”

“That’s very good,” I said.

“That one is wobbly,” Melle said, examining the D critically.

“She could learn so much more from you than I can teach her,” said Diero. She seldom expressed any wish, and when she did it was so gentle and indirect I often missed it. I caught it this time.

“It’s wobbly, but I can read it quite well,” I said to Melle. “It says D. D is how you start writing Diero’s name. Would you like to see how to do the rest of it?”

The little girl said nothing, but leapt up again and fetched the inkstand and the writing brush. I thanked her and carried them over to the table. I found a clean scrap of canvas and wrote out DIERO in big letters, pulled up a stool for Melle to perch on, and gave her the brush.

She did a pretty good job of copying, and was praised. “I can do it better,” she said, and crouched over the table to copy again, eyebrows drawn tight together, brush held tight in the sparrow-claw hand, pink tongue clamped tight between the teeth.

Again Diero had given me back something I had lost when I left Arcamand. Her eyes were bright as she watched us.

After that I came by her apartment nearly every day to read with her and to teach little Melle her letters. Often the child’s sister was there. Irad was very shy with me at first, and I with her; she was so beautiful, so unguarded, and so clearly Barna’s property. But Diero always stayed with us, protecting us both. Melle adored Diero and soon attached herself passionately to me too. She’d rush at me when I came into the room, crying, “Beaky! Beaky’s here!” and strangle me with hugging when I

picked her up. That made Irad begin to trust me, and talking and playing with the child put us at ease. Melle was serious, funny, and very intelligent. In Irad's fiercely protective love for her there was an element of admiration, almost awe. She would say, "Ennu sent me to look after Melle."

They each wore a tiny figure of Ennu-Mé, a crudely modeled clay cat's head, on a cord around the neck.

It wasn't hard for me to persuade Irad that learning how to read and write along with Melle was a good idea, and so she joined in the lessons. Like Diero, she was doubtful and hesitant in learning. Melle was not, and it was touching to see the little sister coaching the big one.

Lessons with the other girls in the house had never got further than half the alphabet; they always lost interest or were called away. The pleasure of teaching Melle made me think I might gather some of the young children of the town into a class. I tried, but couldn't make it work. The women wouldn't trust their girls to any man; the children were needed to go into the fields with their mother, or look after their baby brother; or they were simply unable to sit still long enough to learn a lesson, and their parents had no idea why they should do so. I needed Barna's backing, his authority.

I approached him with the proposal of establishing a school, a place set aside, with regular hours. I'd teach reading and writing. To flatter his sense of superiority to me, Pulter would be asked to recite and lecture on literature. The accountant might teach a little practical arithmetic. Barna listened, nodded, and approved heartily, but when I began to suggest the place I thought suitable, he had reasons why it would not do. Finally he said, clapping me on the shoulder, "Put it off till next year, Scholar. Things are too busy now, people just can't spare the time."

"Children of six or seven can spare the time," I said.

"Kiddies that age don't want to be locked up in a classroom! They need to be running about and playing, free as birds!"

"But they aren't free as birds," I said. "They're drudging at field work with their mothers, or lugging their baby sisters and brothers around. When are they going to learn anything else?"

"We'll see that they do. I'll talk about this with you again!" And he was off to see about the new additions to the granaries. He was indeed endlessly busy and I made allowance for it, but I was disappointed.

I made up for it to myself by offering to give talks in the room I'd hoped to use as a schoolroom. I told people I'd tell some of the history of the City States and Bendile and other lands of the Western Shore, evenings, if they wanted to come listen. I got an audience of nine or ten grown men; women didn't go in the streets at night. My hearers mostly came just to hear stories, but a couple of them took a shrewd interest in the variety of customs and beliefs, laughing heartily at outlandish ways of doing and thinking, and ready to talk about whys and wherefores. But they'd worked hard all day, and when I went on long I'd see half my audience asleep. If I were ever to educate the Forest Brothers, I'd have to catch them younger.

My failure to start a school left me all the more time to be with Diero and Melle, and I was happier with them than anywhere else. I still went about with Barna, but his interest was all in immediate projects, the new buildings and planned expansion of the community kitchens. The Heart of the Forest was rapidly becoming more prosperous as the herds and gardens thrived and the raiders brought in goods. When I talked with the netmen who went into Asion, over the weak beer in the beer house Chamry frequented, they spoke only about stealing and trading. It seemed to me they were sent out mostly to get luxuries.

Venne was back from a long trip with his group, and he and some of his mates often joined us at the beer house. He liked his work. It was exciting, and he hadn't had to shoot anybody, he said. I asked him if people outside the forest knew who they were. Over towards Piram, where he had been, he said the villagers called the raiders "Barna's boys." They were willing to barter with them, but were wary, always urging them to go on to the next town and "skin the merchants."

I asked Venne if the raiders ever talked to people about the Uprising. He'd never heard of it at all. "A revolt? Slaves? How could slaves fight? We'd have to be like an army, to do that, seems like." His ignorance made me think that only certain men were entrusted with the risky task of spreading the plans for the Uprising; but I didn't know who they were.

I asked the raiders if slaves in the villages or on the farms often asked to join them. They said sometimes a boy wanted to run off with them, but they usually wouldn't take him, for not even cattle theft roused such vengeful pursuit as slave stealing. But they all had stories about slaves

who’d escaped and followed them on their own. Most of them had been such runaways themselves. “See, we knew we couldn’t get into Barna’s town without we went with Barna’s boys,” said a young man from a village on the Rassy. “And I do keep an eye out for fellows like I was.”

“And that’s how you get the girls you bring in too?” I asked.

That brought on laughter and a babble of stories and descriptions. Some girls were runaways, I gathered, but the raiders had to be careful about accepting them, “because they’ll be followed, like as not, and not know how to hide their tracks, and likely they’re with child”—and another man broke in, “It’s only the pregnant and the ugly ones and maimed and harelips that tries to join us. The ones we want are kept shut up close.”

“So how do you get them to join you?” I asked.

More laughter. “Same way we get the cattle and sheep to join us,” said Venne’s leader, a short, rather pudgy man, who Venne told me was a fine hunter and scout. “Round ’em up and drive ’em!”

“But don’t touch, don’t touch,” said another man, “at least not the prettiest one or two. Barna likes ’em fresh.”

They went on telling stories. The men who had taken Irad and Melle were there, and one of them told the tale, rather boastfully, since everybody knew Irad was Barna’s favorite. “They was just out at the edge of the village, the two of ’em, in the fields, and Ater and I come by on horseback. I took one look and give Ater the wink and hopped off and grabbed the beauty, but she fought like a she-bear, I tell you. She was trying to get her hand to that knife of hers, now I know it, and lucky she didn’t, or she’d have had my guts out. And the little one was jabbing at my legs with the little sharp spade she had, cutting ’em to ribbons, so Ater had to come pull her off, and he was going to toss her aside, but the two of ’em hung on to each other so tight, so I said take both the damn little bitches then, and we tied ’em up together and put ’em up in front of me on my big mare. They screeched the whole time, but we was just far enough from the houses nobody heard. That was a lucky haul, by Sampa! I doubt they missed those girls till nightfall, and by then we was halfway to the forest.”

“I wouldn’t want a woman that fought like that, with a knife and all,” said Ater, a big, slow man. “I like ’em soft.”

The conversation wandered off, as it often did in the beer house, into comparing kinds of women. Only one of the eight men around our table

had a woman of his own, and he was teased remorselessly about what she did while he was off raiding. The others were talking more about what they wanted than what they had. The Heart of the Forest was still a city of men. An army camp, Barna sometimes said. The comparison was apt in many ways.

But if we were soldiers, what war were we fighting?

"He's gone off broody again," Venne said, and clucked like a hen. I realised somebody had made a joke about me and I'd missed it. They laughed, good-natured laughter. I was the Scholar, the bookish boy, and they liked me to play my absent-minded role.

I went back to Barna's house. I was to give a recital that evening. Barna was there, as always, in his big chair, but he had Irad sitting on his lap, and he fondled her as he listened to me tell a tale from the *Chamhan*.

Though he sometimes caressed his girls in public, he had always done it jokingly, calling a group of them to come around him and "keep me warm on a winter night," and inviting some of his men to "help themselves." But that was after feasting and drinking, not during a recitation. Everyone knew he was besotted by Irad, calling her to his bedroom every night, ignoring all his earlier favorites. But this crass display in public was a new thing.

Irad held perfectly still, submitting to his increasingly intimate caresses, her face blank.

I stopped before the end of the chapter. The words had dried up. I'd lost the thread of the story, and so had many of my hearers. I stood silent a minute, then bowed and stepped down.

"That's not the end, is it?" said Barna in his big voice.

I said, "No. But it seemed enough tonight. Maybe Dorremer would play for us?"

"Finish the tale!" Barna said.

But other people had begun to move about and talk, and several seconded my call for music, and Dorremer came forward with her lyre as she often did after Pulter or I recited. So it passed off, and I made my escape. I went to Diero's rooms, not my own. I was troubled and wanted to talk with her.

Melle was asleep in the bedroom. Diero was in her sitting room without any light but the moon's. It was a sweet clear night of early summer. The

forest birds they called nightbells were singing away off among the trees, calling and answering, and sometimes a little owl wailed sweetly. Diero's door was open. I went in and greeted her, and we sat without talking for a while. I wanted to tell her about Barna's behavior, but I didn't want to spoil her serenity, which always quietened me. She said at last, "You're sad tonight, Gav."

I heard someone run lightly up the stairs. Irad came in. Her hair was loose and she was panting for breath. "Don't say I'm here!" she whispered, and ran out again.

Diero stood up. She was like a willow, black and silver in the moonlight. She took up the flint and steel and struck a light. The little oil lamp bloomed yellow, changing all the shadows in the room and leaving the moon's cold radiance out in the sky. I didn't want to lose our quiet mood, and was about to ask Diero, petulantly, why Irad was playing hide-and-seek. But there was the noise of heavier feet on the staircase, and now Barna stood in the doorway. His face was almost black, swollen, in the tangled mass of his hair and beard. "Where is the bitch?" he shouted. "Is she here?"

Diero looked down. Trained in submissiveness all her life, she was unable to answer him with anything but a shrinking silence. And I too shrank from the big man blind with rage.

He pushed past us, flung open the bedroom door, looked around in the bedroom, and came out again, staring at me. "You! You're after her! That's why Diero keeps her here!" He rushed at me like a great, red boar charging, his arm upraised to strike me. Diero came between us crying out his name. He knocked her aside with one hand. He seized me by the shoulders and lifted and shook me as Hoby used to do, slapped my head left and right, and threw me down.

I don't know what happened in the next minute or two. When I could sit up and see through the dazzling blackness that pulsed in my eyes, I saw Diero huddled on the floor. Barna was gone.

I managed to get to my hands and knees, then get up. I looked into the bedroom. No one was there but a tiny shadow cowering against the wall by one of the beds.

I said, "Don't be afraid, Melle, it's all right." I found it difficult to talk. My mouth was filling with blood and a couple of teeth were loose on the

right side. “Diero will be here in a moment,” I said.

I went back to Diero. She had sat up. The lamp was still burning. In its weak pool of light I could see that the soft skin of her cheek was bruised. I could not bear to see that. I knelt down by her.

“He found her,” she whispered. “She hid in your room. He went straight there. Gav, what will you do?” She took my hand. Her hand was cold.

I shook my head, which made it ring and spin again. I kept swallowing blood.

“What will he do to her?” I said.

She shrugged.

“He’s angry—he could kill her—”

“He’ll hurt her. He doesn’t kill women. Gav. You can’t stay here.”

I thought she meant this room.

“You must go. Leave! She went to your room. She didn’t know where to hide. Oh, poor child. Oh, Gav! I have loved you so much!” She put her face down on my hand, weeping silently for a moment, then raised her head again. “We’ll be all right. We’re not men, we don’t matter. But you have to go.”

“I’ll take you,” I said. “And them—Irad and Melle—”

“No, no, no,” she whispered. “Gav, he’ll kill you. Go now. Now! The girls and I are safe.” She got up, pulling herself up by the table, and stood shakily a minute; then she went into the bedroom. I heard her soft voice talking to the child. She came out carrying her. Melle clung to her, hiding her face.

“Melle-sweet, you must say goodbye to Gav.”

The child turned and held out her arms, and I took her and held her tight. “It will be all right, Melle,” I said. “Do your lessons with Diero. Promise? And help Irad with them. Then you’ll both be wise.” I didn’t know what I was saying. I was in tears. I kissed the child and set her down. I took Diero’s hand and held it against my mouth a moment, and went out.

I went to my room, belted on my knife, put on my coat, and put the small copy of the *Cosmologies* in the pocket. I looked around the little room with its one high window, the only room of my own I’d ever had.

I left Barna’s house by the back way and went round through the streets to the cobblers’ barrack. In the great wash of moonlight the city of wood was a city of silver-blue, shadowed, silent, beautiful.

PART THREE

Chapter 11

CHAMRY ROUSED up quickly when I sat down on his bunk. I told him I wanted to stay with him a while, as there'd been a misunderstanding at Barna's house. "What do you mean?" he said. He got the story out of me, though I didn't want to say much. "That girl? She was in your room? Oh by the Stone! You get clear out, clear away, tonight!"

I argued. It had merely been a misunderstanding. Barna had been drunk. But Chamry was out of bed, rummaging under the bunk. "Where's that stuff you left, your fishing gear and all— There. Knew it was here. All right. Take this stuff of yours and go to the gate. Tell the watch that you want to be at the trout pool before sunrise, it's the best fishing just at sunrise—"

"The best fishing's at sunset," I said.

He looked at me with pained disgust. Then his look sharpened. He touched my cheek. "Got a whack, did you? Lucky he didn't kill you right there. If he sees you again he will. He turns on men like that. Over women. Or somebody trying to shake his power. I've seen it. Saw him kill a man. Strangled him and broke his neck with his bare hands. You take this stuff. Here's your old blanket, take it too. Go to the gate."

I stood there blank as a post.

"Oh, I'll go with you," he said crossly. And he did walk me, hastily and by the back streets, towards the city gate, talking with me all the way, telling me what to say to the watchmen, and what to do when I was in the woods. "Don't go by the paths! Don't take any path. They're all guarded, one time or another. I wish— Yes! that's it, he can take you— Come on, this way!" He changed course, turning off on the street where Venne lived with his raiding group. He left me standing in the black shadow of the barrack and went in. I stood there looking at the silver-blue roofs, which

danced a little to the throbbing in my head. Chamry came out again, with Venne. “It’s hunting you’re going,” he said, “not fishing. Come on!”

Venne was carrying a couple of bows and had his quiver on his back. “Sorry you’re in trouble, Gav,” he said mildly.

I tried to explain that I wasn’t in trouble, Barna had just been drunk, and all this panic was unnecessary. Chamry said, “Don’t listen to him. Got his brains knocked loose. Just take him to where he can get clear away.”

“I can do that,” Venne said. “If they’ll let us out the gate.”

“Leave that to me,” said Chamry. And indeed he talked us out the city gate with no trouble. Chatting with the guards, he made sure at once that Barna hadn’t sent out anybody after me. The guards knew all of us, and let us go with nothing but a warning to be back by sunset. “Oh, I’ll be back in no time,” said Chamry. “I don’t set out on hunting trips at midnight! I’m just seeing these idiots off.”

He went with us till we were past the gardens and at the forest’s edge. “What’ll I tell them when I come back?” Venne asked.

“You lost him. At the river. Looked for him all day. He fell in, or maybe he ran off.— Think it’ll do?”

Venne nodded.

“It’s thin,” Chamry said judiciously, “pretty thin. But I’ll say I’d heard Gav talking about running off to Asion. So, he tricked you into taking him out hunting, and then gave you the slip. You’ll be all right.”

Venne nodded again, unworried.

Chamry turned to me. “Gav,” he said, “you’ve been nothing but a burden and trouble to me ever since you turned up and tried to wear my kilt on your head. You dragged me back here, and now you’re running out on me. Well, have a good run. Go west.”

He looked for confirmation to Venne, who nodded.

“And stay out of the Uplands,” Chamry said. He put his arms round me in a hard embrace, turned away, and was gone in the darkness under the trees.

Unwillingly, I followed Venne, who set off without hesitation on a path I could scarcely make out at all. The flashes of moonlight through the branches and trunks of the trees dazzled and bewildered me. I kept stumbling. Venne realised that I was having trouble and slowed down. “Fetched you a whack, eh?” he said. “Dizzy?”

I was a little dizzy, but I said it would wear off, and we went on. I was still sure that everybody had gone into a foolish panic, urging me into running away from a mere misunderstanding that could all be explained in the morning. I'd seen Barna in a rage before. His anger was mindless, brutal while it lasted, but it didn't last, it blew over like a thunderstorm. I planned that at dawn I'd tell Venne I was turning around and going back.

But as we went on at an easy pace in the cool night air and silence, my head gradually cleared. What had happened in Barna's house began to come back to me; I began to see it again. I saw Barna fondling the motionless, expressionless girl while men and women watched. I saw the terror in Irad's face when she ran to us to hide from him, and the madness in his face. I saw the dark red bruise on Diero's cheek.

Venne halted on the rocky, steep bank of a small stream to drink. I washed my face. My right ear and both cheeks were sore and swollen. A little owl wailed away off in the woods. The moon had just set.

"Let's wait here till there's a bit of light," Venne said in his low voice, and we sat there in silence. He dozed. I wet my hand and laid the cool of it against my swollen ear and temples again and again. I looked into the darkness. I cannot say how my mind moved in that darkness, but as the trees and their leaves and the rocks of the stream bank and the movement of the water began mysteriously to take on being in the grey dim beginning of the light, I knew, with a certainty beyond decision, that I could not go back to Barna's house.

The only emotion I felt was shame. For him, for myself. Again I had trusted, and again I had betrayed and been betrayed.

Venne sat up and rubbed his eyes.

"I'll go on," I said. "You don't have to come farther."

"Well," he said, "my story is you gave me the slip, so I've got to spend all day pretending to look for you. And I want to get you on far enough they won't catch you."

"They won't be looking for me."

"Can't be sure of that."

"Barna won't want me back."

"He might want to finish knocking your brains out." Venne stood up and stretched. I looked up at him with a melancholy fondness, the slender, scarred, soft-voiced hunter who had always been a kind companion. I

wished I could be certain he would not get into trouble with Barna for abetting my escape.

"I'll go on west," I said. "You circle round and come back from the north, so if they do send out after me you can send them off the wrong way. Go on now so you have time to do that."

He insisted on coming with me till he could get me on a path that would take me out of the Daneran Forest, to the west road. "I've seen you going in circles in the woods!" he said. And he gave me many instructions: not to light a fire till I was clear out of the woods, to remember that at this time of the year the sun set well south of west, and so on. He fretted that I had no food with me. As we went along, on no path at all but through fairly open oak woods, he kept looking at every hump and hillock in the ground, and eventually pounced on a heap of brush and trashwood, tore it open, and laid bare a wood rat's granary: a couple of handfuls of little wild walnuts and acorns. "Acorns'll give you the pip, but better than nothing," he said. "And over by the west road there's a big stand of sweet chestnuts. You might find some still on the trees. Keep an eye out. Once you're out of the forest, you'll have to beg or steal. But you've done that before, eh?"

We came at last to the path he was looking for, a clear wood road that curved right off to the west. There I insisted that he turn back. It was late morning already. I was going to shake his hand, but he embraced me, hard, as Chamry had done. He muttered, "Luck go with you, Gav. I won't forget you. Or your stories. Luck go with you!"

He turned away, and in a moment was gone among the shadows of the trees.

That was a bleak moment.

At this time yesterday I'd been at the food handout in Barna's house with a cheerful group of men and women, looking forward to reciting for Barna in the evening . . . Barna's scholar. Barna's pet . . .

I sat down on the edge of the wood road and took stock of what I had. Shoes, trousers, shirt, and coat; the old ragged evil-smelling brown wool blanket, my fishing gear, a pocket full of nuts stolen from a wood rat, a good knife, and Caspro's *Cosmologies*.

And all my life in Arcamand, and in the forest. Every book I had read, every person I had known, every mistake I had made—I brought that with

me, this time. I will not run away from it, I said to myself. Never again. It comes with me. All of it.

And where should I take it?

The only answer I had was the road I was on. It would lead me to the Marshes. To where Sallo and I had been born. To the only people in the world I might belong to. I'll bring you back your stolen children, or one of them anyway, I said in my mind to the people of the Marshes, trying to be jaunty and resolute. I got up and set out walking west.

WHEN I WENT UP the riverbank away from Etra, I was a boy dressed in white mourning, going alone, a strange sight in itself; and people could tell that I was not in my right mind. That had protected me. The mad are holy. Now, walking along this lonely forest road, I was two years older and looked and dressed like what I was: a runaway. If I met people, my only protection from suspicion or from slave takers was in my own wits, and from Luck, who might be getting tired of looking after me.

The road would bring me out on the west side of the Daneran Forest, and going on west or southwest I'd come to the Marshes. I didn't know what villages might be on my way; I was sure there were no towns of any size. I had seen the country where I now was, from far off, long ago, in the golden evening light, from the summit of the Ventine Hills. It had looked very empty. I remembered the great blurred shadow of the forest eastward, and the level, open lands stretching north. Sallo and I had gazed for a long time. Sotur asked us if we could remember the Marshes, and I spoke of my memory of the water and the reeds and the blue hill far off, but Sallo said we'd both been too young to remember anything. So that memory must be the other kind I used to have, a memory of what had not happened yet.

It had been a long time since I had such a vision. When I left Etra I left my past behind me, and with it, the future. For a long time I'd lived in the moment only—until this past winter, with Diero, when I finally had the courage to look back, and take back again the gift and burden of all I'd lost. But the other, the visions and glimpses of time to come, it seemed I'd lost forever.

Maybe it was living among the trees, I thought as I walked along the forest road. The infinite trunks and tangling, shadowing branches of the forest kept the eye from seeing far ahead in space or in time. Out in the open, in the level lands, between the blue water and blue sky, maybe I'd be able to look forward again, to see far. Hadn't Sallo told me long ago, sitting close beside me on the schoolroom bench, that that was a power I had from our people?

"Don't talk about it," says her small, soft voice, warm in my ear. "Gavir, listen, truly, you mustn't talk about it to anybody."

And I never had. Not among our captors, our masters in Arcamand, who had no such powers, who feared them and would not understand. Not among the escaped slaves in the forest, for there I had had no visions of the future, only Barna's dreams and plans of revolution and liberation. But if I could go among my own people, a free people, without masters or slaves, maybe I'd find others with such powers, and they could teach me how to bring back those visions, and learn the use of them.

Such thoughts buoyed my spirits. I was in fact glad to be alone again at last. It seemed to me now that all the year I was with Barna, his great, jovial voice had filled my head, controlling my thoughts, ruling my judgment. The power of his being was in itself like a spell, leaving me only corners of my own being, where I hid in shadow. Now, as I walked away from him, my mind could range freely back over all my time in the Heart of the Forest, and with Brigin's band, and before that, with Cuga, the old mad hermit who had saved the mad boy from death by starvation. . . . But that thought brought me sharply back to the present moment. I hadn't eaten since last night. My stomach was beginning to call for dinner, and a pocket full of walnuts wasn't going to take me far. I decided I wouldn't eat any until I reached the end of the forest. There I'd have a wood-rat banquet and decide what to do next.

It was still only mid-afternoon when the road came out through a thin stand of alders to meet another, larger road that ran north and south. There were cart ruts on it left from the last rains, many sheep tracks, and some horseshoe tracks, though it lay empty as far as I could see. Across it was open country, scrubby and nondescript, with a few stands of trees.

I sat down behind a screen of bushes and solemnly cracked and ate ten of my walnuts. That left me twenty-two, and nine acorns, which I kept

only as a last resort. I got up, faced left, and walked boldly down the road.

My mind was busy with what I might tell any carter or drover or horseman who overtook me. I decided the one thing I had that might show me as something more than a runaway slave boy was the little book I carried in my pouch. I was a scholar's slave, sent from Asion to carry this book to a scholar in Etra, who was ill and wished to read it before he died, and had begged his friend in Asion to send it to him, with a boy who could read it to him, for his eyes were failing. . . . I worked on the story diligently for miles. I was so lost in it I didn't even see the farm cart that turned from a side track into the road a little way behind me until the jingle of harness and the clop-clop of big hoofs woke me up. The horse's enormous, mild-eyed face was practically looking over my shoulder.

"Howp," said the driver, a squat man with a wide face, looking me over with no expression at all on his face.

I mumbled some kind of greeting.

"Hop up," the man said more distinctly. "Good ways yet to the crossroads."

I scrambled up onto the seat. He studied me some more. His eyes were remarkably small, like seeds in his big loaf of a face.

"You'll be going to Shecha," he said, as an inarguable fact.

I agreed with him. It seemed the best thing to do.

"Don't see you folk much on the road no more," the driver said. And at that I realised that he had taken me for—that he had recognised me as—one of the Marsh people. I didn't need my complicated story. I wasn't a runaway, but a native.

It was just as well. This fellow might not have known what a book was.

All the slow miles to the crossroads, through the late afternoon and the immense gold-and-purple sunset, he told me a tale about a farmer and his uncle and some hogs and a piece of land beside Rat Water and an injustice that had been done. I never understood any of it, but I could nod and grunt at the right moments, which was what he wanted. "Always like talking with you folk," he said when he dropped me off at the crossroads. "Keep your counsel, you do. There's Shecha road."

I thanked him and set off into the dusk. The side road led off southwest. If Shecha was a place of the Marsh people, I might as well go there.

After a while I stopped and cracked all the rest of the walnuts between two stones, and ate them one by one as I went on, for my hunger had grown painful.

Evening was darkening when I saw a glimmer of lights ahead. As I came closer, the shining of water reflected the last light in the sky. I came through a cow pasture to a tiny village on the shore of a lake. The houses were built up on stilts, and some stood right out over the water at the end of piers; there were boats docked, which I could not make out clearly. I was very tired and very hungry and the yellow glimmer of a lighted window was beautiful in the late dusk. I went to that house, climbed the wooden stairs to the narrow porch, and looked in the open door. It seemed to be an inn or beer house, windowless, with a low counter, but no furniture at all. Four or five men sat on a rug on the floor with clay cups in their hands. They all looked at me and then looked away so as not to stare.

“Well, come in, boy,” one said. They were dark-skinned, slight, short men, all of them. A woman behind the counter turned around, and I saw old Gammy, the piercing bright dark eyes, the eagle nose. “Where d’you come from?” she said.

“The forest.” My voice came out as a hoarse whisper. Nobody said anything. “I’m looking for my people.”

“Who are they then?” the woman asked. “Come in!” I came in, looking hangdog, no doubt. She slapped something on a plate and shoved it across the counter towards me.

“I don’t have money,” I said.

“Eat it,” she said crossly. I took the plate and sat down with it on a seat by the unlighted hearth. It was a kind of cold fish fritter, I think, quite a large one, but it was gone before I knew what it was.

“Who’s your people, then?”

“I don’t know.”

“Makes it a bit hard to find ’em,” one of the men suggested. They kept looking at me, not with a steady stare or with hostility, but covertly studying the new thing that had come their way. The instant disappearance of the fritter had caused some silent amusement.

“Around here?” another man asked, rubbing his bald head.

“I don’t know. We were stolen—my sister and I. Slave raiders from Etra. South of here, maybe.”

“When was that?” the innkeeper asked in her sharp voice.

“Fourteen or fifteen years ago.”

“He’s a runaway slave, is he?” the oldest of the men murmured to the one next to him, uneasy.

“So you was a little tad,” said the innkeeper, filling a clay cup with something and bringing it to me. “What name had you?”

“Gavir. My sister was Sallo.”

“No more than that?”

I shook my head.

“How’d you chance to be in the forest?” the bald man asked, mildly enough, but it was a hard question and he knew it.

I hesitated a little and said, “I was lost.”

To my surprise, they accepted that as an answer, at least for the moment. I drank the cup of milk the woman had given me. It tasted sweet as honey.

“What other names do you remember?” the woman asked.

I shook my head. “I was one or two years old.”

“And your sister?”

“She was a year or two older.”

“And she’s a slave in Etra?” She pronounced it “Ettera.”

“She’s dead.” I looked around at them, the dark, alert faces. “They killed her,” I said. “That’s why I ran away.”

“Ah, ah,” said the bald man. “Ah, well . . . And how long ago was that?”

“Two years ago.”

He nodded, exchanging glances with a couple of the others.

“Here, give the boy something better than cow piss, Bia,” said the oldest man, who had a toothless grin and looked a little simple. “I’ll stand him a beer.”

“Milk’s what he needs,” said the innkeeper, pouring my cup full again. “If that was beer he’d be flat on his face.”

“Thank you, ma-ío,” I said, and drank the milk down gratefully.

The honorific, I think, made her give a rasp of a laugh. “City tongue, but you’re a Rassiu,” she observed.

“So they’re not on your trail, so far as you know,” the bald man asked me. “Your city masters, down there.”

“I think they think I drowned,” I said.

He nodded.

My weariness, the food filling my hunger, their wary kindness and cautious acceptance of me as what I was—and maybe my having to say that Sallo had been killed—it all worked on me to bring tears into my eyes. I stared at the ashes in the hearth as if a fire was burning there, trying to hide my weakness.

"Looks like a southerner," one of the men murmured, and another, "I knew a Sallo Evo Danaha down at Crane Levels."

"Gavir and Sallo are Sidoyu names," the bald man said. "I'm off to bed, Bia. I'll set off before dawn. Pack us up a dinner, eh? Come along south with me if you like, Gavir."

The woman sent me upstairs after him to the common sleeping room of the inn. I lay down in my old blanket on a cot and fell asleep like a rock dropping into black water.

The bald man shook me awake in the dark. "Coming?" he said, and I struggled up and got my gear and followed him. I had no idea where he was going or why or how, only that he was going south, and his invitation was my guidance.

A tiny oil lamp burned in the room downstairs. The innkeeper, who stood behind the counter as if she had stood there all night long, handed him a large packet wrapped in something like oiled silk, took his quarter-bronze, and said, "Go with Mé, Ammeda."

"With Mé," he said. I followed him out into the dark and down to the waterside. He went to a boat, which looked immense to me, tied up to a pier. He untied the rope and dropped down into the boat as casually as stepping down a stair. I clambered in more cautiously, but in a hurry, as it was already drifting from the pier. I crouched in the back end of the boat, and he came and went past me doing mysterious things in the dark. The gold spark of the inn doorway was already far behind us over the black water and fainter than the reflections of the stars. He had raised a sail on the short mast in the middle of the boat, not much of a sail, but it took the slight wind and we moved steadily on. I began to get used to the strange sensation of walking while floating, and by the time there was some light in the sky I could move around well enough, if I hung on to things.

The boat was narrow and quite long, decked, with a low rope rail all round; the whole middle of it was a long, low house.

“Do you live on the boat?” I asked Ammeda, who had sat down in the stern by the tiller and was gazing off over the water at the growing light in the east.

He nodded and said something like “Ao.” After a while he remarked, “You fish.”

“I have some gear.”

“Saw that. Give it a try.”

I was glad to be of use. I got out my hooks and lines and the light pole that Chamry had taught me how to make in fitted sections. Ammeda offered no bait, and I had nothing but my acorns. I stuck the wormiest one on the barb of a hook, feeling foolish, and sat with my legs over the side trailing the line. To my surprise, I got a bite within a minute, and pulled up a handsome reddish fish.

Ammeda gutted, split, and boned the fish with a wicked, delicate knife, sprinkled something from his pouch on it, and offered me half. I’d never eaten raw fish, but ate it without hesitation. It was delicate and sweet, and the spice he’d put on it was ground horseradish. The hot taste took me back to the forest, a year ago, digging horseradish roots with Chamry Bern.

My other acorns wouldn’t stay on the hook. Ammeda had kept the fish guts on a leaf of what looked like paper. He gave them to me as bait. I caught two more of the reddish fish, and we ate them the same way.

“They eat their kind,” he said. “Like men.”

“Looks like they’ll eat anything,” I said. “Like me.”

Always when I’m hungry, I crave the grain porridge of Arcamand, thick and nutty, seasoned with oil and dried olives, and I did then; but I was feeling very much better with a pound or two of fish in my belly. The sun had come up and was warming my back deliciously. Small waves slipped by the sides of the boat. Ahead of us and all around us was bright water, dotted here and there with low islands of reeds. I lay back on the deck and fell asleep.

We sailed all that day down the long lake. The next day, as its shores drew together, we entered a maze of channels between high reeds and rushes, lanes of blue-silver water widening and narrowing between walls of pale green and dun, endlessly repeated, endlessly the same. I asked Ammeda how he knew his way and he said, “The birds tell me.”

Hundreds of small birds flitted about above the rushes; ducks and geese flew overhead, and tall silver-grey herons and smaller white cranes stalked the margins of the reed islets. To some of these Ammeda spoke as if in salutation, saying the word or name *Hassa*.

He asked me no more about myself than he had the first night, and he told me nothing about himself. He was not unfriendly, but he was deeply silent.

The sun shone clear all day, the waning moon at night. I watched the summer stars, the stars I'd watched at the Vente farm, rise and slide across the vault of the dark. I fished, or sat in the sunlight and gazed at the ever-differing sameness of channels and reed beds, the blue water and the blue sky. Ammeda steered the boat. I went into the house and found it almost filled with cargo, mostly stacks and bundles of large sheets of a paperlike substance, some thin, some thick, but very tough. Ammeda told me it was reedcloth, made from beaten reeds, and used for everything from dishes and clothing to house walls. He carried it from the southern and western marshes, where it was made, to other parts, where people would pay or barter for it. Barter had filled his house with oddments—pots and pans, sandals, some pretty woven belts and cloaks, clay jugs of oil, and a large supply of ground horseradish. I gathered that he used or traded these things as he pleased. He kept his money—quarter- and half-bronzes and a few silver bits—in a brass bowl in the corner of the structure, with no effort to conceal it. This, and the behavior of the people at the inn at Shecha, gave me an idea that the people of the Marsh were singularly unsuspicious or unafraid, either of strangers or of one another.

I knew, I knew all too well, that I was prone to put too much trust in people. I wondered if the fault was inborn, a characteristic, like my dark skin and hawk nose. Overtrustful, I had let myself be betrayed, and so had betrayed others. Maybe I had come to the right place at last, among people like me, who would meet trust with trust.

There was time for my mind to wander among such thoughts and hopes in the long days of sunlight on the water, and to think back, too. Whenever I thought of my year in the Heart of the Forest, I heard Barna's voice, his deep, resonant voice, ringing out, talking and talking . . . and the silence of the marshes, the silence of my companion, were a blessing, a release.

The last evening of my journey with Ammeda, I'd fished all day and had a fine catch ready. He lighted and tended a fire of charcoal in a big ceramic pot with a grill over the top of it set out on the deck in the lee of the house. Seeing me watching him, he said, "You know I have no village." I had no idea what he meant or why he said it, and merely nodded, waiting for more; but he said no more. He spattered the fish with oil and a few grains of salt and broiled them. They were succulent. After we ate he brought out a pottery jug and two tiny cups and poured us what he called ricegrass wine, clear and very strong. We sat in the stern. The boat was moving slowly down a wide channel. He did nothing to catch the wind, but only touched the tiller now and then to keep the course. A clear blue-green-bronze dusk lay over the water and the reeds. We saw the evening star tremble like a drop of water low in the west.

"The Sidoyu," Ammeda said. "They live near the border. Slave takers come through there. Could be that's where you come from. Stay if you like. Look around. I'll be back through in a couple of months." After a pause he added, "Been wanting a fisherman."

I realised that he was saying in his laconic way that if I wanted to rejoin him then, I was welcome.

Next morning at sunrise we were again in open water. After an hour or two we approached a solid shore where some trees grew and little stilted houses stood up over the banks. I heard children shouting. A small mob of them were on the pier to meet the boat. "Women's village," Ammeda said. I saw that the adults following the children were all women, dark, thin-limbed, in brief tunics, with short curling hair like Sallo's hair—and I saw Sallo's eyes, I saw her face, glimpses, flashes of her everywhere among them. It was strange, troubling, to see these strangers, these sisters all about me.

As soon as we tied up at the pier, the women were scrambling over the boat, peering at what Ammeda had to offer, feeling the reedcloths, sniffing the oil jars, chattering away to him and to one another. They didn't speak to me, but a boy of ten or so came up, stood in front of me with his feet apart, and said importantly, "Who are you, stranger?"

I said, with a rush of absurd hope of being instantly recognised, "My name is Gavir."

The boy waited a moment and then asked rather pompously, as if offended, “Gavir—?”

It seemed I needed more names than I had.

“Your clan!” the boy demanded.

A woman came and pulled him away without ceremony. Ammeda said to her and an older woman with her, “He was taken as a slave. Maybe from the Sidoyu.”

“Ah,” the older woman said. Turning sideways to me, not looking at me, but unmistakably speaking to me, she asked, “When were you taken?”

“About fifteen years ago,” I said, the foolish hope rising in me again.

She thought, shrugged, and said, “Not from here. You don’t know your clan?”

“No. There were two of us. My sister Sallo and I.”

“Sallo is my name,” the woman said in an indifferent voice. “Sallo Issidu Assa.”

“I am seeking my people, my name, ma-ío,” I said.

I saw the sidelong, flashing glance of her eye, though she stayed turned half from me. “Try Ferusi,” she said. “The soldiers used to take people from down there.”

“How will I come to Ferusi?”

“Overland,” Ammeda said. “Walk south. You can swim the channels.”

While I turned to get my gear together, he talked with Sallo Issidu Assa. He told me to wait for her while she went into the village. She came back with a reedcloth packet and laid it on the deck beside me. “Food,” she said in the same indifferent tone, her face turned from me.

I thanked her and stowed the packet in my old blanket, which I had washed out and dried on the journey through the marshes, and which served as a backpack. I turned to Ammeda to thank him again, and he said, “With Mé.”

“With Mé,” I said.

I started to hop off the pier onto the ground, but a couple of women called out a sharp warning, and the officious boy came rushing to block my way. “Women’s ground, women’s ground!” he shouted. I looked about not knowing where to go. Ammeda pointed me to the right, where I made out a path marked with stones and clamshells right at the edge of the water. “Men go that way,” he said. So I went that way.

Within a very short distance the path led me to another village. I was uneasy about approaching it, but nobody shouted at me to keep away, and I went in among the little houses. An old man was sunning himself on the porch of his house, which seemed to be built of heavy reedcloth mats hung on a wooden frame. “With Mé, young fellow,” he said.

I returned the greeting and asked him, “Is there a road south from here, ba-dí?”

“Badí, badí, what’s badí? I am Rova Issidu Meni. Where do you come from, with your badí-badí? I’m not your father. Who is your father?”

He was more teasing than aggressive. I had the feeling he knew the salutation I had used perfectly well, but didn’t want to admit it. His hair was white and his face had a thousand wrinkles.

“I’m looking for my father. And my mother. And my name.”

“Ha! Well!” He looked me over. “Why d’you want to go south?”

“To find the Ferusi.”

“Ach! They’re a queer lot. I wouldn’t go there. Go there if you like. The path goes through the pasture.” And he settled back down, stretching his little, black, bony legs, like crane’s legs, out in the sun.

No one else seemed to be in the village; I could see fishing boats out on the water. I found the path leading inland through the pasture and set off south to find my people.

Chapter 12

IT WAS a two days' walk to Ferusi. The path meandered a great deal but tended always south, as well as I could tell by having the sun on my left in the morning and on my right at sunset. There were many channels through the grasslands and willow meads to wade or swim, holding my pack and shoes up out of the water on a stick, but it was easy walking otherwise, and my supply of dried fish cakes and salted cheese lasted me well enough. From time to time I saw the smoke of a cabin or a village off to one side or another and a side path leading to it, but the main way kept on, and I kept on it. So late on the second day the path turning left along the sandy shore of a great lake led me to a village—pastures with a few cows, a few willows, a few little houses up on stilts, a few boats at the piers. Everything in the Marshes repeated itself with a slightly varied sameness, an extreme simplicity.

There were no children around the village, and I saw a man spreading out a fishing net, so I walked on between the houses and called to him, "Is this Ferusi?"

He laid the net down carefully and came towards me. "This is East Lake Village of Ferusi," he said.

He listened gravely as I told him the quest I was on. He was thirty or so, the tallest man I'd seen among the Rassiu, and his eyes were grey; I knew later that he was the son of a Marsh woman raped by an Etran soldier. When I told him my name he said his, Rava Attiu Sidoy, and courteously invited me to his house and table. "The fishermen are coming back now," he said, "and we'll go to the fish-mat. Come with us and you can ask your question of the women. It's the women who will know."

Boats were coming in to the piers and unloading their catch, a dozen or more light boats with small sails that made me think of moth wings. The village began to come alive with the voices of men, and dogs, too. Dogs

came leaping out of the boats to prance ashore through shallow water, slender black dogs with tight-curled coats and large bright eyes. The manners of these dogs were quite formal: they greeted one another with a single bark, each investigated the other's other end while tail-wagging vigorously, one of them bowed and the other accepted the bow, and then they parted, each following its master. One of the dogs carried a large dead bird, a swan perhaps; it went through no ceremonies with other dogs but trotted off importantly along the beach westward with its bird. And quite soon all the men followed it, carrying their catch in nets and baskets. Rava brought me along with them. Around a grassy headland, in a little cove, we came to the women's village of East Lake.

A number of women were waiting in a meadow at a large sheet of reedcloth spread out on the ground. A lot of children ran about the edges, but were careful not to set a foot on the cloth. Pots and reedcloth boxes full of cooked food were set out as if at a market. The men set down and displayed their catch on the cloth in the same way, and the dog laid the bird down and stood back wagging its tail. There was a lot of talking and joking, but it was unmistakably a formal occasion, a ceremony, and when a man came forward to take a box or pot of food, or a woman to pick up a net bag of fish, they said a ritual phrase of thanks. An old woman pounced on the swan, shouting, "Kora's arrow!" and that brought on more joking and teasing. The women seemed to know exactly which catch went to which woman; the men did a little more discussing over who got what, but the women mostly made it clear, and when two young men had an argument over a box of fritters a woman settled it by nodding at one of the rivals. The one who didn't get them went off sulkily. When everything had been picked up, Rava brought me forward and said to the women in general, "This man came to the village today, looking for his people. He was taken to Ettera by the soldiers as a young child. He knows his name only as Gavir. People in the north thought he might be a Sidoyu."

At that all the women came forward to stare at me, and a sharp-eyed, sharp-nosed, dark-skinned woman of forty or so asked, "How many years ago?"

"About fifteen, ma-ío," I said, "I was taken with my older sister Sallo."

An old woman cried out—"Tano's children!"

“Sallo and Gavir!” said a woman with a baby in her arms, and the old woman carrying the dead swan by its large black feet pushed up close to study me and said, “Yes. Her children, Tano’s children. Ennu-Amba, Ennu-Mé!”

“Tano went for blackfern, down the Long Channel,” one of the women said to me. “She and the children. They didn’t come back. Nobody found the boat.”

“Some said she drowned,” another woman said, and another, “I always said it was the slave takers,” and the older women pressed forward still closer to look at me, looking in me for the woman they had known. The young women stood back, eyeing me in a different way.

The dark woman who had spoken to me first had said nothing and had not come forward. The old woman with the swan went and talked to her, and then the dark one came close enough to say to me, “Tano Aytano Sidoy was my younger sister. I am Gegemer Aytano Sidoy.” Her face was grim and she spoke harshly.

I was daunted, but after a minute I said, “Will you tell me my name, Aunt?”

“Gavir Aytana Sidoy,” she said, almost impatiently. “Did your mother—your sister—come back with you?”

“I never knew my mother. We were slaves in Etra. They killed my sister two years ago. I left and went to the Daneran Forest.” I spoke briefly and said “left,” not “escaped” or “ran away,” because I needed to speak like a man, not like a runaway child, to this woman with her crow’s face and crow’s eyes.

She looked at me briefly, intensely, but did not meet my gaze. She said at last, “The Aytanu men will look after you,” and turned away.

The other women clearly wanted to keep looking at me and talking about me, but they followed my aunt’s lead. The men were beginning to straggle back to their village. So I turned and followed them.

Rava and a couple of older men were having a discussion. I couldn’t follow all they said; the Sidoyu dialect was strange to my ears and contained a lot of words I didn’t know. They seemed to be talking about where I belonged, and finally one of them turned back and said to me, “Come.”

I followed him to his cabin, which was wood-framed, with a wooden floor, and walls and roof of reedcloth. It had no door or windows, since you could open up a whole side of it by raising any of the walls. Having put away the box and clay pot of food which he'd got from the women, the man raised the wall that faced the lake and tied it up on posts so that it extended the roof, shading that part of the deck from the hot late-afternoon sunlight. There he sat down on a thick reedcloth mat and set to work on a half-made fish hook of clamshell. Not looking up at me, he gestured to the house and said, "Take what you like."

I felt intrusive and out of place, and did not want to take anything at all. I did not understand these people. If I was truly a lost child of the village, was this all the welcome they had for me? I was bitterly disappointed, but I wasn't going to show any disappointment, any weakness to these coldhearted strangers. I would keep my dignity, and act as standoffish as they did. I was a city man, an educated man; they were barbarians, lost in their marshes. I told myself that I'd come a long way to get here and might as well stay the night at least. Long enough to decide where else I might go, in a world where evidently I belonged nowhere.

I found another mat and sat down on the outer edge of the deck. My feet dangled a couple of inches above the mud of the lakeshore. After a while I said, "May I know the name of my host?"

"Metter Aytana Sidoy," he said. His voice was very soft.

"Would you be my father?"

"I would be the younger brother of that one, your aunt," he said.

The way he spoke, keeping his face down, made me suspect that he was not so much unfriendly as very shy. Since he didn't look at me, I felt I shouldn't stare too much at him, but from the corner of my eye I could tell he didn't look much like the crow woman, my aunt, or like me.

"And of my mother?"

He nodded. One deep nod.

At that I had to look round at him. Metter was younger than Gegemer by a good deal, and not so dark and sharp-faced; in fact he looked something like Sallo, round-cheeked, with clear brown skin. Maybe that was what my mother Tano had looked like.

He would have been about the age I was now when his sister disappeared with her two little children.

After a long time I said, “Uncle.”

He said, “Ao.”

“Am I to live here?”

“Ao.”

“With you?”

“Ao.”

“I will have to learn how to live here. I don’t know how you live.”

“Anh,” he said.

I would soon be familiar with these grunted or murmured responses: *ao* for yes, *eng* for no, and *anh* for anything between yes and no, but having the general meaning: I heard what you said.

Another voice made itself heard: *mao!* A small black cat appeared from a heap of something in the darkness of the hut, came across the deck, and sat down beside me, decorously curling its tail round its front paws. Presently I gave its back a tentative stroke. It leaned up into my hand, so I continued stroking it. It and I gazed out across the lake. A couple of the black fishing-dogs ran past on the lakeshore; the cat ignored them. My uncle Metter was, I noticed, looking at the cat instead of bending industriously over his work. His face had relaxed.

“Prut’s a good mouser,” my uncle said.

I kneaded the nape of the cat’s neck. Prut purred.

After a while Metter said, “Mice are thick this year.”

I scratched behind Prut’s ears and wondered if I should tell my uncle that for one summer of my life I had eaten mice as a major part of my diet. It seemed unwise. Nobody had yet asked me anything about where I came from.

No one in Ferusi ever would. I had been in “Ettera”—where the slave takers came from, the robbing, raping, murdering, child-stealing soldiers. That was all they needed to know. I’d been elsewhere. They didn’t want to know about elsewhere. Not many people do.

It wasn’t easy for me to ask them about Ferusi, not that they didn’t know all about it or didn’t want to talk about it, but because it was their entire universe and was therefore taken for granted. They could not understand the kind of questions I asked. How could anybody not know the name of the lake? Why would anybody ask why men and women lived separately—surely no one could think they should live shamelessly in the

same village, the same house? How could anybody possibly be ignorant of the evening worship or the words to say when giving or receiving food? How could a man not know how to cut reedgrass or a woman not know how to pound it to make reedcloth? I soon learned that I was more ignorant here than I'd been even my first winter in the forest, for there was a lot more to be ignorant of. City people might say that the Sidoyu were simple people, living a simple life; but I think only a life as solitary, poor, and crude as Cuga's could be called simple, and even so the word belies it. In the villages of the Sidoyu existence was full, rich, elaborate, a tapestry of demanding relationships, choices, obligations, and rules. To live as a Sidoy was as complex and subtle a business as to live as an Etran; to live rightly as either was, perhaps, equally difficult.

My uncle Metter had taken me into his house without any show of welcome, certainly, but without the least reluctance; he was quite ready to be fond of his long-lost nephew. He was a mild, modest, gentle man, embedded contentedly in the village network of duties and habits and relations like a bee in a hive or a swallow in a colony of mud nests. He wasn't very highly considered by the other men, but didn't mind, not being restless or rivalrous. He had several wives, and that did earn him respect, though any relationship with women was of course set apart from the rest of a man's life. . . . But if I try to tell what I learned about living as a Sidoy as I learned it—slowly, in fragments, by guesswork—my story will go on and on. I must explain what I can while I get on with what happened.

What happened was that I ate a good supper of cold fish cakes and ricegrass wine with my uncle, his cat Prut, and his dog Minki, a kind old bitch who showed up just in time for her supper. She put her greying muzzle on my palm very politely. I watched my uncle dance and speak a brief worship to the Lord of the Waters on the deck of his hut in the twilight, as other men were doing on the decks of their huts in the twilight, and then he unrolled a bed mat for himself and helped me lay out the sitting mats as my bed. The cat went mousing underneath the hut, and the dog curled up on her master's mat as soon as he unrolled it. We lay down, said good night, and went to sleep while the last gleam of daylight was fading from the water of the lake.

Before sunrise the men of the village went out on the lake, one or two of them to a boat, with a dog or two. Metter told me that this was the season

for great numbers of a fish called tuta to come into the lake from the seaward channels, and they hoped this morning might begin the run. If so, I gathered they'd be working hard for a month or so in both villages, the men catching fish and the women drying them. I asked if I could come with him and begin to learn how they fished. He was the sort of man who finds it impossible to say no. He hemmed and mumbled. Somebody was coming that I should talk to, was all I could understand.

"Is it my father who is coming?" I asked.

"Your father? Metter Sodia, you mean? Oh, he went north after Tano was lost," Metter said rather vaguely. I tried to ask but all he would say was, "Nobody ever heard about him again."

He got away as soon as he could and left me alone in the village—with the cats. Every house had its black cat, or several of them. When the men and dogs were gone, the cats ruled, lying about on the decks, wandering over the roofs, having hissing matches between houses, bringing kittens out to play in the sun. I sat and watched cats, and though the kittens made me laugh, I felt my heart very heavy. I knew now that Metter meant no unkindness. But I had come home to my people, and they were utterly strange to me, and I a stranger to them.

I could see the fishing boats away off on the lake, the tiny wings of the sails on the silken blue water.

A boat was coming towards the village. It was a big canoe, several men paddling hard. The canoe slid up to the muddy shore, the men leapt out, drew it up farther, and then came directly to me. Their faces were painted, I thought, then saw it was tattooing: all had many lines drawn from temple to jaw, and an older man's whole forehead to the eyebrows was covered with vertical black lines, as was the top of his nose, so that he looked like a heron with a head dark above and light below. They walked with stately dignity. One of them carried a stick with a great plume of white egret feathers on top of it.

They halted in front of the deck of Metter's cabin and the older man said, "Gavir Aytana Sidoy."

I stood up and reverenced them.

The older man made a long statement which I did not understand a word of. They waited a moment, and then he said to the man with the stick, "He hasn't had any of the training."

They conferred for a while, and the man with the stick turned to me. “You will come with us for your initiation,” he said. I must have looked blank. “We are the elders of your clan, the Aytanu Sidoyu,” he said. “Only we can make you a man, so that you can do a man’s work. You’ve had no training, but do your best, and we’ll show you what to do.”

“You can’t stay as you are,” the older man said. “Not among us. An uninitiated man is a danger to his village and a disgrace to his clan. The claw of Ennu-Amba is against him and the herds of Sua flee from him. So. Come.” He turned away.

I stepped down from the deck among them, and the man with the stick touched my head with the egret plume. He didn’t smile, but I felt his good will. The others were cold, stern, formal. They closed in round me and we went to the canoe, got in, pushed off. “Lie down,” Egret Plume murmured to me. I lay down between the rowers’ feet, and could see nothing but the bottom of the canoe. It too was made of reedcloth, I realised, heavy strips laminated across and across and stiffened with a translucent varnish till it was smooth and hard as metal.

Out in mid-lake the rowers lifted their paddles. The canoe hung in the silence of the water. In that silence, a man began to chant. Again the words were completely incomprehensible. I think now that they may have been in Aritan, the ancient language of our people, preserved over the centuries in the ritual of the Marsh dwellers, but I don’t know. The chanting went on a long time, sometimes one voice, sometimes several, while I lay still as a corpse. I was half in a trance when Egret Plume whispered to me, “Can you swim?” I nodded. “Come up on the other side,” he whispered. And then I was being picked up by several men as if I were indeed a corpse, swung high up into the air, and thrown right out of the boat headfirst.

It was all so sudden that I didn’t know what had happened. Coming up and shaking the water out of my eyes, I saw the side of the canoe looming above me. “Come up on the other side,” he’d said—so I dived right down and swam under the huge shadow of the canoe, coming up again gasping just outside its shadow in the water. There I trod water and stared at the canoe full of men. Egret Plume was shaking his feathered stick and shouting “Hiyi! Hiyi!” He reversed the stick and held out the plain end to me. I grabbed it and he hauled me in to the side of the canoe, where several hands pulled me aboard. The instant I sat up, something was

jammed down over my head—a wooden box? I couldn't move my head inside it, and it came right down onto my shoulders. I could see nothing but the gleam of light from below my chin. Egret Plume was shouting "Hiyi!" again and there was some laughter and congratulation among the others. Whatever had happened apparently had happened the right way. I sat on a thwart with my head in a box and did not try to make sense out of anything.

I've told this much of the initiation because it isn't secret; anybody can see it. The fishermen out on the lake had gathered near the war canoe to watch. But once I had the box on my head, we steered straight for the village where the secret rites were held.

Ferusi was five villages: the one where I was born, East Lake, and four others strung out within a few miles along the shores of Lake Feru. They took me for initiation to South Shore, the largest village, where the sacred things were kept. The big canoes were called war canoes not because the Marsh people ever fought a war either against others or among themselves, but because men like to think of themselves as warriors, and only men paddled the big canoes. The box on my head was a mask. While I wore the mask I was called the Child of Ennu. To the Rassiu the cat goddess Ennu-Mé is also Ennu-Amba, the black lion of the Marshes. I can't tell more of the rites of initiation, but when they were all done I had a fine black line tattooed from the hair above my temple down to my jaw, one on each side. I am so dark-skinned the lines are hard to see. Once I was initiated and came back to East Lake, I realised that all the men had such lines down the side of their face, and most had two or more.

And when I was initiated and came back to East Lake, I was one of them.

I was an odd one, to be sure, since I was so ignorant. But the men of my village let me know they thought I wasn't totally stupid, probably because I showed promise as a fisherman.

I was treated much as the other boys were. Normally, a boy came over from the women's village after his initiation at about thirteen and lived with an older male relative for some years—his mother's brother, or an older brother, occasionally his father. Fatherhood was much less important than relation through the mother's family members, one's clan.

Here in the men's village, boys learned the men's trades: fishing and boat building, bird hunting, planting and harvesting ricegrass, cutting reeds. The women kept poultry and cattle, gardened, made reedcloth, and preserved and cooked food. Boys older than seven or eight living in the women's village weren't expected or even allowed to do women's work, so they came over to the men's village lazy, ignorant, useless, and good for nothing, or so the men never got tired of telling them. Boys weren't beaten —I never saw a Rassiu strike another person, or dog, or cat—but they were scolded and nagged and ordered about and criticized relentlessly until they had learned a craft or two. Then they had their second initiation, and could move into a hut of their own choice, alone or with friends. The second initiation wasn't permitted until the older men agreed that the boys had fully mastered at least one skill. Sometimes, they told me, a boy, refusing his second initiation, chose to return to the women's village and live there as a woman the rest of his life.

My uncle had several wives. Some Rassiu women had several husbands. The marriage ceremony consisted of the two people announcing, "We are married," at the daily food exchange. Scattered along between the two half villages were some little reedcloth huts, just big enough for a cot or mat, which were used by men and women who wanted to sleep together. They made their assignation at the food exchange or at a private meeting in the paths or fields. If a couple decided to marry, the man built a marriage hut, and his wife or wives came to it whenever they agreed or arranged to. I once asked my uncle as he left in the evening which wife he was going to, and he smiled shyly and said, "Oh, they decide that."

As I watched the young people flirting and courting, I saw that marriage had a good deal to do with skill in fishing and skill in cooking, for a husband gives the fish to the wife, who cooks it for him. That daily food exchange of raw for cooked was called "the fish-mat." The women, with their poultry and dairying and gardening, actually produced a good deal more of our food than the men did by fishing, but their butter and cheese and eggs and vegetables were all taken for granted, while everybody made a fuss over what the men provided.

I understood now why Ammeda had seemed ashamed when he cooked the fish I'd caught. Village men never cooked. Boys and unmarried men had to bargain or wheedle for their dinners, or take whatever was left on

the fish-mat. My uncle's taste in wives and cooks was excellent. I ate well while I lived with him.

I spent the year after my initiation as an Aytan Sidoy of the Rassiu learning how to do what the men of my people did: fish, plant and harvest ricegrass, and cut and store reeds. I was unhandy with a bow and arrow, so I wasn't asked to go out in the boat to shoot wild fowl, as boys often were. I became my uncle's net thrower. While we dragged the net, I fished with the rod and line. My knack for this was recognised at once and won me approval. Often we took a boy along to shoot, and it was the joy of old Minki's life to leap into the water after the duck or goose when he brought one down, fetch it back to the boat, and carry it proudly ashore, wagging her tail. She always gave her birds to my uncle's oldest wife Pumo, and Pumo thanked her gravely.

Planting and harvesting ricegrass is the easiest job on earth, I think. You go out in autumn in a boat on the silky blue water over at the north end of the lake where the rice islets are close together, and pole slowly down the tiny channels, tossing handfuls of small, dark, sweet-smelling grain in showers to right and left as you go. Then in late spring you go back, bend the tall grasses down into the boat from right and left, and knock the new seeds off the stems into the boat with a little wooden rake till the boat's half full of it. I know the women sniggered at the fuss the men made about planting and harvesting ricegrass, as if there were any skill to it; but they always received our bags of rice with praise and honor at the fish-mat exchange. "I'll stuff you a goose with it!" they said. And it tasted almost as good as Etran grain porridge.

As for reed cutting, that was hard work. We did a great deal of it, in late autumn and early winter, when the weather was often grey and cold or raining. Once I got used to standing all day in water two or three feet deep, and to the angle of the curved scythe and the triple rhythm of cutting and gathering and handing—for you must gather the reeds together before they separate and drift off on the water, and hand the long, heavy bundle up into the boat—I liked it well enough. The young fellows I went out with were good companions, rivalrous about their own prowess as cutters, but kind to me as a novice, and full of jokes and gossip and songs that they shouted across the great reed beds in the rainy wind. Not many of the older men

went reed cutting; the rheumatism they had got from doing it as young men kept them from it now.

It was a dull life, I suppose, but it was what I needed. It gave me time to mend. It gave me time to think, and to grow up at my own pace.

Late winter was a pleasant, lazy time. The reeds had been cut and handed over to the women to make into reedcloth, and there wasn't much for the men to do unless they were boat makers. Nothing bothered me but the damp, foggy cold: our only heat was from a tiny charcoal fire in a ceramic pot. It made a very small sphere of warmth in the hut. If the sun was shining, I went to the shore and watched the boat makers at their work, a refined and exacting skill. Their boats are the finest art of the Rassiu. A war canoe is like a true line of poetry, there is nothing to it that is not necessary, it is purely beautiful. So when I wasn't huddled over the fire pot dreaming, I watched the boat grow. And I made myself a good set of rods and lines and hooks, and fished if it wasn't raining hard, and talked to my friends among the young people.

Though women didn't set foot in the men's village or men in the women's village, we had, after all, the rest of the world to meet in. Men and women got to talking at the fish-mat, and out on the lake from boat to boat—for the women fished too, especially for eels—and in the grasslands inland from the villages. My luck in fishing helped me make friends among the girls, eager to trade their cooked food for my catch. They teased me and flirted mildly and were happy to walk along the lakeshore or an inland path, a few of them with a few of us young men. Real pairing off was forbidden until the second initiation. Boys who broke that law were exiled from their village for life. So we young people stayed together as a group. My favorite among the girls was Tisso Betu, called Cricket for her pinched little face and skinny body; she was bright and kind and loved to laugh, and she tried to answer my questions instead of staring at me and saying, "But Gavir, everybody knows that!"

One of the questions I asked Tisso was whether anybody ever told stories. Rainy days and winter evenings were long and dull, and I kept an ear out for any tales or songs, but subjects of talk among the boys and men were limited and repetitive: the day's events, plans for the next day, food, women, rarely a little news from a man from another village met out on the lake or in the grasslands. I would have liked to entertain them and

myself with a tale, as I had Brigin's band and Barna's people. But no one here did anything like that at all. I knew that foreign ways, attempts to change how things were done, weren't welcomed by the Marsh people, so I didn't ask. But with Tisso I wasn't so afraid of putting a foot wrong, and I asked her if nobody told stories or sang story-songs. She laughed. "We do," she said.

"Women?"

"Ao."

"Men don't?"

"Eng." She giggled.

"Why not?"

She didn't know. And when I asked her to tell me one of the stories I might have heard if I'd been a little boy growing up in the women's village, it shocked her. "Oh, Gavir, I can't," she said.

"And I can't tell you any of the stories I learned?"

"Eng, eng, eng," she murmured. No, no, no.

I wanted to talk to my aunt Gegemer, who could tell me about my mother. But she still held aloof from me. I didn't know why. I asked the girls about her. They shied away from my questions. Gegemer Aytano was, I gathered, a powerful and not entirely beloved woman in the village. At last, on a winter day when Tisso Betu and I were walking in the pastures behind the rest of the group, I asked her why my aunt didn't want anything to do with me.

"Well, she's an ambamer," Tisso said. The word means marsh-lion's daughter, but I had to ask what that meant.

Tisso thought about it. "It means she can see through the world. And hear voices from far away."

She looked at me to see if I knew what she was talking about. I nodded a little uncertainly.

"Gegemer hears dead people talking, sometimes. Or people who aren't born yet. In the old women's house, when they do the singing, Ennu-Amba Herself comes into her, and then she can walk all across the world and see what's happened and what's going to happen. You know, some of us do some of that kind of seeing and hearing while we're children, but we don't understand it. But if Amba makes a girl her daughter, then she goes on seeing and hearing all her life. It makes her kind of strange, you know."

Tisso pondered for a while. “She has to try to tell people what she saw. The men won’t even listen. They say only men can have the power of seeing and an ambamer is just a crazy woman. But Mother says that Gegemer Aytano saw the poison tide, when the people who eat shellfish in the Western Marshes got sick and died, a long time before it happened, when she was just a child. . . . And she knows when people in the village are going to die. That makes people afraid of her. Maybe it makes her afraid of them. . . . But sometimes she knows when a girl’s going to have a baby, too. I mean, even before she is. She said, ‘I saw your child laugh, Yenni,’ and Yenni cried and cried, she was so happy, because she wanted a child and she’d never got one. And a year later she did.”

All this gave me a great deal to think about. But it still didn’t answer my question. “I don’t know why my aunt doesn’t like me,” I said.

“I’ll tell you what Mother told me, if you won’t say anything to any of the other men,” Tisso said earnestly. I promised silence, and she told me. “Gegemer tried and tried to see what had happened to her sister Tano and her babies. For years she tried. They had singings for her that went on and on. She even took the drugs, and an ambamer shouldn’t take the drugs. But Amba wouldn’t let her see her sister or the children. And then—then you came walking into the village, and still she didn’t see you. She didn’t see who you were, until you said your name. Then everyone saw. She was ashamed. She thinks she did something wrong. She thinks Amba is punishing her because she let Tano go alone so far south. She thinks it was her fault the soldiers raped Tano and sold you and your sister. And she thinks you know this.”

I was about to protest, but Tisso forestalled me: “Your soul knows it—not your mind. It doesn’t matter what your mind doesn’t know, if your soul knows. So you are a reproach to Gegemer. You darken her heart.”

After a while I said, “That darkens my heart.”

“I know,” Tisso said sadly.

It was strange how Tisso made me think of Sotur. Utterly different in everything, they were alike in their quickness to feel pity, to understand grief, and not to say too much about it.

I gave up the idea of trying to approach my aunt through her armor of guilt. I longed to learn more about her powers, and Tisso’s saying, “Some of us do that kind of seeing when we’re children,” had intrigued me. But

the limits drawn around men's knowledge and women's knowledge were nearly as clear as the line separating the half villages. Tisso was uneasy about having said so much to me, and I could not press her further. None of the other girls would let me ask about "sacred stuff" at all: they hooted like owls or yattered like kingfishers to drown me out—half alarmed at my transgression and half laughing at me for being, as they said, such a tadpole.

I was reluctant to ask the boys my age what they knew about these powers of seeing. I was different enough already, and talking about such things would only estrange me further. My uncle left all mysteries alone, seeking comfort only where it was easy to find. I didn't know any of the older men well. Rava was the kindest, but he was an elder, an initiator of his clan, and spent much of his time in South Shore. There was only one man I thought might welcome my questions. Peroc was old, his thick hair quite white, his face seamed and drawn; he was crippled with rheumatism, and lived, I think, in pain. His arthritic hands were not good for much, but he laboriously knotted and mended fishing nets, and though he was slow at the work it was always done perfectly. He lived by himself in a tiny house with a couple of cats. He spoke little, but had a gentle manner. He was often too lame to go to the fish-mat. Tisso's mother sent food for him, and I offered to take it to him. It became a regular thing that she'd give it to me and I'd take it and set it down on the old man's deck and say, "From Lali Betu, Uncle Peroc." We young men called all the old men uncle.

He'd be sitting in the sun if there was any sun, working at a net, or just gazing over the grasslands, humming. He'd thank me, and as soon as I turned away, the soft humming would begin again. Soon half-comprehensible words would enter into the tune, strange song words about the marsh lion, the lords of the fish, the heron king. . . . They were the only serious songs I had heard in Ferusi, the only ones that hinted at a story behind them. One day I put down his reed box of food and said, "From Lali Betu, Uncle Peroc," and he thanked me, but I did not turn away; I stood by his deck and said, "Can I ask about the songs you sing, Uncle?"

He glanced up at me and back at his work, then laid the net down and looked at me steadily. "After the second initiation," he said.

That was what I'd been afraid of. There was no arguing with the rules of the sacred. I said, "Anh." But he saw I had a second question, and waited

for it.

"Are all the stories sacred?"

He gazed at me a minute, thinking, and finally nodded. "Ao."

"So I may not listen to you sing?"

"Eng," he said, the soft negative. "Later. When you've been to the king's palace." He looked at me with sympathy. "You'll learn the songs there, as I did."

"The heron king?"

He nodded, but murmured, "Eng, eng," with a gesture to prevent my asking more. "Later," he said. "Soon."

"There are no stories that are not sacred?"

"Those the women and children tell. They are not fit for men."

"But there are tales of heroes—like Hamneda, the great hero who wandered all the length of the Western Shore—"

Peroc gazed at me a while and shook his head. "He did not come here to the Marshes," he said. And he bent to his work again.

So all my tales and poems remained closed up in my head, silent, as my copy of Caspro's poem lay closed and wrapped in reedcloth in my uncle's house, the only book in all Ferusi, unread.

I WAS FISHING by myself one day in spring; my uncle had gone netting with another man. Old Minki jumped into the boat as a matter of course and sat in the prow like a curly-eared figurehead. I put up the little sail and let the wind carry us slowly up the lake. I didn't net but fished with the rod and line for ritta, a small bottom fish, sweet and succulent. The ritta were lazy and so was I. I gave up after a while and just sat in the boat, drifting. All around me was the silken blue water, and in the distance a few reed islands, and beyond them the low green shore, and far in the distance a blue hill . . .

So I had come round to the earliest and oldest of all my rememberings or visions, and was in the memory, the vision itself.

Remembering that, I began all at once to remember other things.

I remembered the streets of cities, the lights of houses crowded over a canal, the dark cobblestones of a steep street in the winter wind—there

was the fountain in front of Arcamand and there was a tower over a harbor full of ships and there was a tall house with red rain-beaten walls—all in a rush and tumult of images, dozens of visions all crowded into one another and then sliding away, ungraspable, gone, leaving nothing but the blue sky and water, the low green shore and the distant hill, where I had been, where I had been all my life and was now again, this once, in this one moment.

The visions lessened, faded. Minki looked round, towards home. I sailed slowly back to the village. People were already gathering for the fish-mat. I had only a couple of little ritta to offer, but Tisso and her mother always had something cooked for me. I took my portion and Peroc's and went back to the men's village, to Peroc's house, where he sat mending a fine net. I set his portion down and said, "From Lali Betu. May I ask you a question, Uncle?"

"Anh."

"All my life I've seen through the world. I've remembered what I had never yet seen, and been where I've never yet been." He had raised his face and was looking at me gravely. I went on, "Is this a power of our people—of the Rassiu? Is it a gift or a curse? Are there any people here who will tell me what my visions are?"

"Yes," he said. "In South Shore. I think you should go there."

He got up laboriously and stepped down off his deck. He came with me to Metter's cabin. My uncle was sitting eating his dinner, with Minki on one side thumping her tail on the deck and Prut on the other with his tail wrapped round his paws. My uncle greeted Peroc and offered him his dinner to share.

"Gavir Aytana in kindness brought me food from the fish-mat," the old man said. He spoke very formally. "It is well known that there have been great seers in your clan, Metter Aytana. Is this not so?"

"Ao," my uncle said, staring.

"It may be that Gavir Aytana has the power. It would be well that the keepers of the sacred things be told this."

"Anh," my uncle said, staring at me now.

"Your net will be ready tomorrow," the old man said in a different tone of voice, and turned to limp back to his cabin.

I sat down near my uncle and began to eat my own dinner. Tisso's mother had made excellent fish cakes rolled up in lettuce leaves with a drop of hot pepper sauce.

"I suppose I'd better go to South Shore," my uncle said. "Or should I talk to Gegemer first, I wonder. But she's . . . I suppose I should just go. I don't know."

"May I go with you?"

Minki thumped her tail.

"That might be good," my uncle said, with relief.

So next day we sailed to South Shore Village, where I'd been initiated. Metter seemed to have no idea what to do once we got there, so I led off to the Big House, where the sacred things were stored and initiations were held. It was the biggest house I'd seen in the Marshes, with walls of rigid lacquered reed such as they built the war canoes of, and a high reed-bundle roof. The fenced court in front of it was bare earth, with a small pool and a great old weeping willow tree beside it. The building was very dark inside, and awesome with the memories of the initiation rites; we did not dare enter, or even speak. We waited by the pool until a man came into the court. I had been about to suggest that we find some members of our clan, the Aytanu, and ask them for advice or assistance, but my uncle went over to the man and began at once to tell him that he was here with his nephew who had the power of seeing visions. The man was one-eyed and had a rake-broom in his hand; he had evidently come to sweep the courtyard. I tried to prevent Metter from babbling to somebody who appeared to be the janitor, but he babbled on. The man nodded, and looked more and more important. At last he said, "I will tell my cousin Dorod Aytana, the seerman of Reed Isles, and he perhaps will find if your nephew is suitable for training. Ennu-Amba has guided your steps to this place. Go with Mé!"

"With Mé," Metter said gratefully. "Come along, Gavir. It's all settled." He couldn't wait to get away from that big house with its dark open doorway. We went straight back to the docks and got into our boat, which Minki had been guarding by lying curled up asleep in the stern, and sailed home.

I didn't put much credit in the one-eyed man's boasts. I thought that if I wanted to find out anything about my visions, I'd have to do it myself.

So I got up my courage and, at the fish-mat that evening, I approached my aunt Gegemer. I'd traded a good catch of ritta with Kora for a goose he'd shot, a fine fat bird which I cleaned and plucked carefully. I had seen men who were courting women make such an offering, and so I offered it to Gegemer. "I need advice and guidance, Aunt," I said, more bluntly than I had intended. She was a formidable woman, hard to speak to.

At first she didn't answer or take the goose from me. I could feel her recoil, her wish to refuse. But she put out her hand at last for the gift and gestured with her head to the gardens, outside which men and women often met to talk. We walked there in silence. I arranged in my mind what I'd say, at least to start with, and when she stopped by a row of old dwarf cherry trees and faced me, I said it.

"I know you're a woman of power, Aunt. I know you see through the world sometimes, and walk with Ennu-Amba."

To my great surprise she laughed, a surprised, scornful laugh. "Hah! I never thought to hear that from a man!" she said.

That took me aback, and I hesitated, but managed to go on with what I'd planned to say. "I am a very ignorant person," I said, "but I have two kinds of power, I think. I can remember very clearly what I've heard and seen. And I can remember, sometimes, what I have not yet heard and seen." There I stopped. I waited for her to speak.

She turned away a little and rested her hand on the gnarled, scaly trunk of a little tree. "And what can I do for a man of power?" she asked at last, with the same hostile scorn.

"You can tell me what the visions are. How to use them, how to understand them. Where I was, in the city, in the forest, no one had this power. I thought, if I could come back to my people, maybe they'd tell me what I need to know. But I think no one here can, or will, except you."

She turned quite away from me at that and was silent for a long time. At last she turned round and faced me. "I could have taught you, Gavir, if you'd been here as a child in our village," she said, and I saw she was holding her mouth tight to keep it from quivering. "It's too late now. Too late. A woman can't teach a man anything. Wherever you've lived, you must have learned that!"

I said nothing, but she must have seen my protest in my face, and that she had hurt me.

“What can I say to you, sister’s son? You come by your gifts truly. Tano could tell any tale she’d heard once, and repeat words she’d heard years before. And I have walked with the lion, as you say—for all the good it’s done me. To bring back the past in memory is a great power. To remember what hasn’t yet come to pass is a great power too. What’s the use of it, you ask me? I don’t know. I’ve never known. Maybe the men know, who look down on women’s visions as meaningless foolishness. Ask them! I can’t tell you. I can only say, hold to the other power, the one your mother Tano had, for it won’t drive you crazy.”

She would not look at me steadily. Her glance was fierce and black as a crow’s. I heard how like my own voice hers was.

“What’s the good of remembering all the stories I ever heard, if men aren’t allowed to tell stories or hear them?” I said, my thwarted anger rising ro meet hers.

“No good,” she said. “You should have been a woman, Gavir Aytana. Then one of your powers might have brought you good.”

“But I’m not a woman, Gegemer Aytano,” I said bitterly.

She looked round at me again and her expression changed. “No,” she said. “Nor quite a man yet. But well on the way.” She paused, and drew a deep breath, and finally said, “I’ll give you what advice I can, though I think you won’t take it. So long as you remember yourself, you’re safe. When you begin to remember farther, you begin to lose yourself—you begin to be lost. Don’t lose yourself, Tano Aytano’s son. Hold to yourself. Remember yourself. No one told me to do that. No one but me will tell you to do it. So, take your risks. And if I ever see you when I walk with the lion, I’ll tell you what I see. That’s the only gift I might have to give you. In return for this,” and she swung the dead goose by its webbed red feet, and scowled, and walked away.

♦

A LITTLE LATER in the spring, when the weather was getting very warm, I came back one afternoon with Minki and my uncle from fishing and found two strangers sitting on the deck. One of them was tall and heavyset for a Rassiu, dressed in a long narrow robe of fine reedcloth bleached almost white; I thought he must be some kind of priest or official. The other man

was shy and silent. The man in the robe introduced himself as Dorod Aytana, and named off a litany of our clan relationship. Metter scurried off with our catch to the fish-mat, since Dorod said it was me they came to talk to, and he was glad to get away from strangers. When he had gone, Dorod said to me, smiling but with authority, “You came to South Shore seeking me.”

“It may be that I didn’t know it,” I said, a fairly common phrase among the Marsh people, who avoid direct negatives and unnecessary commitments.

“You have not seen me in vision?”

“I believe I have not,” I said humbly.

“Our ways have been coming closer for a long time now,” Dorod said. He had a deep, soft voice and an impressive manner. “I know that you were brought up among foreigners and have only been in Ferusi for a year. Our kinsman at the Big House in South Shore sent to tell me that you had come at last. You seek a teacher; you have found him. I seek a seer; I have found him. Come with me to my village, Reed Isles, and we will begin your training. For it is late, very late. You should have been learning the way of the visions for years now. But we will make up for lost time—for time is never lost, is it? We will bring you into your power, maybe within a year or two, if you give all your soul to it. Your second initiation then will not be as a mere fisherman or reed cutter, but as a seer of your clan. There is no seer of the Aytanu now. Not for many years. You have been long wanted, long awaited, Gavir Aytana!”

Of all he said, it was those last words that went to my heart. Who had ever waited for me to come? A stolen child, a slave, a runaway, a kind of ghost to my own people, a stranger everywhere else—who wanted or would wait for me?

“I’ll come with you,” I said.

Chapter 13

REED ISLES was the westernmost, the smallest, and the poorest of the five villages of Ferusi. Its houses were scattered on the isles and inlets of a bay in the southwest corner of Ferusi Lake. Dorod lived with his meek and silent cousin Temec in a hut on a muddy, reed-surrounded peninsula. There were fewer women than men in the village, and the women seemed indifferent and aloof. There were forty or so people, but only four marriage huts. The fish-mat was not the sociable, pleasurable event it was in East Lake.

I didn't get to know anyone in this village well but Dorod. He kept me busy and away from the others. I missed the easy, lazy companionship of fishing with my uncle or with the young men, talking with Tisso and other girls, watching the boat builders, cutting reeds, planting ricegrass, the slow day rhythm that I had lived in for a year now, often bored into a kind of trance, but never unhappy.

I went out fishing daily here, and we often kept half the catch for ourselves, for the women provided few vegetables, little meal, no fruit. I certainly would have been willing to fry up our catch or make fish cakes with the coarse meal the women ground, but for a village man to cook would turn society inside out and upside down and make me an outcast from my people forever. As it was, Dorod and I ate a good deal of fish raw, as I'd done with Ammeda, but we didn't have any horseradish to give it a kick. Nobody here shot birds; they were forbidden in this village as sacred creatures—hassa—wild goose, duck, swan, and heron. Little freshwater clams, delicious and very common here, were a staple of the local diet, but they became poisonous at rare, unpredictable intervals; Dorod forbade himself and me to eat them.

Temec told me that Dorod's previous novice, a child, had died of the shellfish poisoning three years ago.

Dorod and I did not get on well. My heart is not naturally rebellious, and I wanted very much to learn what he could teach me about my power, but I'd learned to distrust my own trustfulness. Dorod demanded absolute trust. He gave me arbitrary orders and expected silent obedience. I questioned the reason for each act. He refused to answer. I refused to obey.

This went on for a half month or so. One morning he instructed me to spend the entire day kneeling in the hut with my eyes shut, saying the word *erru*. Two days earlier I had done just that. I told him I couldn't kneel that long again, my knees were still too painful from the last time. He said, "You must do as I say," and went off.

I'd had enough. I made up my mind to walk back round the lake to East Lake Village.

He came back into the hut and found me knotting up the little bundle of my belongings in the old brown blanket, which my uncle's cat Prut had nearly worn to shreds by kneading it with his claws before he went to sleep on it.

"Gavir, you cannot go," he said, and I said, "What can I learn if you keep me in ignorance?"

"The seerman is the guide. It is his burden and task to carry the mystery for the seer."

He spoke, as he often did, pompously, but I felt he believed what he said.

"Not this seer," I said. "I need to know what I'm doing and why I should do it. You want blind obedience. Why should a seer be blind?"

"The seer of visions must be guided," Dorod said. "How can he guide himself? He gets lost among the visions. He doesn't know whether he lives now or years ago or in years to come! You yourself, though you've barely begun to travel in time, have felt that. No one can walk that path by himself, unguided."

"My aunt Gegemer—"

"An ambamer!" Dorod said. "Women, babbling nonsense, screeching and screaming, seeing useless glimpses of things they don't understand. Phoh! A seer is trained and guided, he serves his clan and people, he is a man of value. I can make you a man of value. I know the secrets, the techniques, the sacred ways. Without a seerman a seer is no better than a woman!"

“Well, maybe I am no better than a woman,” I said. “But I’m not a child. You treat me as a child.”

New ideas came hard to Dorod, as perhaps they do to most villagers and tribesmen, but he could listen, he could think, and he was extremely, almost unnaturally, sensitive to mood and hint. What I said struck him hard.

He said nothing for a while and finally asked, “How old are you, Gavir?”

“About seventeen.”

“Seers are trained young. Ubec, whom I was training, was only twelve when he died. And I took him when he was seven.” He spoke slowly, thinking as he spoke. “You are an initiated man. A child can be trained to obey in all things.”

“I was well trained in trust and obedience,” I said with some bitterness. “As a child. Now I want to know what I’m to put my trust in, and what power I’m obeying.”

Again he listened to what I said, and thought before he spoke. “The power of your soul to see truth,” he said at last—“that is what both the seer and seerman must follow.”

“Since I’m not a child, why can’t I learn to do it by myself?”

“But who would read your visions?” he said with blank surprise.

“Read them?” I said as blankly.

“I must learn to read the truth in what you see, so that I can tell people of it. That’s my task as your seerman! How can a seer do that for himself?” He saw that I was as perplexed as he was. “Do you know what it is you see, Gavir? Do you know the people, the place, the time, the meaning of the vision?”

“Only after they come to pass,” I admitted. “But how can *you* know?”

“That is my power! You are the eyes of our people, but I am your voice! The seer is not given the gift of reading what he sees. That is for the man trained in the ways of the myriad channels, who knows the roots of the reeds, where Amba walks, where Sua passes, where Hassa flies. You will learn to see and to tell me what you see. To you the visions are mysteries—is that not so? You can tell me only what you see. But I, looking with the eyes of Amba, looking deep within, I will understand the mysteries, and learn to speak the meaning of what is seen, and so give guidance to our

people. You need me as I need you. And our kinfolk and all the clans of Ferusi need us both."

"How do you know how to . . . read my visions?" I hesitated on the word "read," which was not one I had ever heard before in the Marshes, and which clearly did not have the meaning I knew.

Dorod gave a kind of laugh. "How do you know how to see them?" he asked. He looked at me now with a less lofty expression, almost companionably. "Why does a man have one power and not another? You can't teach me to see visions. I can teach you how to see them, but not how to read them, because that is my power, not yours. I tell you, we need each other."

"You can teach me how to see visions?"

"What do you think I've been trying to do?"

"I don't know! You never say. You say fast every third day, never go barefoot, don't sleep with my head to the south, kneel till my knees break—a hundred rules and do's and don'ts, but what for?"

"You fast to keep your spirit pure and light, so it can travel easily."

"But I'm not getting enough to eat between fasts. My spirit is so pure and light that it thinks about nothing except food. What good is that?" He frowned, and in fact looked a little ashamed. I pressed my advantage: "I don't mind fasting, but I won't starve. Why do I have to wear shoes?"

"To keep your feet from contact with the earth, which draws the spirit down."

"Superstition," I said. He looked blank. I said, "I've had visions both shod and barefoot. I don't need to learn obedience. I've had that lesson. I want to understand my power, and to learn how to use it."

Dorod bowed his head in silence. After a long time he answered me, gravely, without patronising impatience or pompousness, "If you will do as I tell you to do, Gavir, I will try to tell you why seers do these things. Perhaps it is true that such knowledge befits your mind as an initiated man."

I was proud of myself for standing up to him, and pleased with myself for earning some respect from him. I put my things back on the shelf by my cot and stayed on with him in his lonely, rather dirty hut.

I saw well enough that Dorod did indeed need me, since his child pupil, when he died, had taken Dorod's position as seerman with him. But if he'd

teach me what he knew, it was a fair bargain, I thought.

It was hard for him to abandon his position as master, to answer my questions, to explain to me why I must do this or that. He was not an ill-natured man, and I think sometimes he found it a pleasure to have, instead of a pupil-slave, a student and companion; but still he never told me anything unless I asked him.

All that he could or would teach me of the songs and the ritual stories I learned quickly. I was at last learning a little of the gods and spirits, the songs and tales of the Rassiu, coming a little closer to the heart of the Marshes.

The gift of memorising hadn't deserted me, for all that I hadn't used it in a long time. So in that way I came along much faster than he had expected. He laughed once and said, of a ritual story I had just repeated to him, "I spent a month trying to hammer that into Ubec's head, and he never got it half right! You learned it in one saying."

"That is half my power, and all my training when I was a slave," I said.

But my power of vision seemed to resist his efforts to bring it forth and train it. I stayed with him a month and another month, and still had no more of those seeings I used to call remembering. I was impatient; he seemed untroubled.

The central practice of his teaching he called waiting for the lion. It was to sit and breathe quietly and bring my thoughts away from all that was around me into a silence within myself: a very difficult thing to do. My knees began to get used to it at last, but it seemed my mind never would.

And he wanted me to tell him every vision I had ever had. This was very hard for me at first. Sallo sat beside me and whispered to me, "Don't talk about it, Gav!" All my life I had obeyed her. Now I was to disobey her to serve the wishes of this strange man. I resisted confiding in Dorod, and yet only he could teach me what I needed to know. I forced myself to speak, haltingly and incompletely describing what I had seen. His patience was inexhaustible: little by little he drew from me everything I could tell him of each "remembering"—the snowfall in Etra, the assault of the Casicaran troop, the cities I walked in, the man in the room with the books, the cave, the terrible dancing figure (which I had seen again when I was initiated), even the first and simplest of them all, the blue water and the reeds. He

wanted to hear the visions over and over. “Tell me again,” he would say. “You are in a boat.”

“What is there to tell? I see the Marshes. Just as they are. Just as I saw them when I was a baby, before I was stolen, no doubt. Blue water, green reeds, a blue hill way off there . . .”

“To the west?”

“No, south.”

How did I know the hill was in the south?

He listened with the same intentness every time, often asking a question but never making any comment. Many words I used evidently meant nothing to him, as when I was trying to describe the cities I saw, or the room full of books where the man turned to me and said my name. Dorod had never seen a city. He used the word “read” but could not read; he had never seen a book. I took my small book, the *Cosmologies*, out of its silky reedcloth wrappings to show him what the word meant. He glanced at it but was not interested. He did not ask for realities or for meanings, only for the closest, most detailed description I could give him of what I had seen in vision. What he made of all I told him I never knew, because he never said.

I wondered about other seers and seermen. I asked Dorod who the other seers of Ferusi were. He told me two names, one in South Shore, one in Middle Village. I asked if I could talk to one of these men. He looked at me, curious: “Why?”

“To talk with him—to find out if it’s like it is for me—”

He shook his head. “They wouldn’t talk to you. They speak of their visions only to their seerman.”

I insisted a little. He said, “Gavir, these are holy men. They live in seclusion, alone with their visions. Only their seerman talks with them. They don’t come out among people. Even if you were fully a seer yourself you wouldn’t be allowed to see them.”

“Is that how I am to be—secluded, shut away, living among my visions?”

The idea was horrible to me, and I think Dorod felt my horror.

He hesitated and said, “You are different. You began differently. I cannot say how you will live.”

“Maybe I’ll never have any more visions. Maybe I came back to the beginning there out on the lake, and the beginning was the end.”

“You’re afraid,” Dorod said, with unusual gentleness. “It’s hard to know the lion is walking towards you. Don’t be afraid. I will be with you.”

“Not there,” I said.

“Yes, even there. Go wait for the lion on the deck now.”

I obeyed, listlessly, kneeling on the little deck of the hut over the mud and stones of the end of the peninsula, looking out at the lake under a calm grey sky. I breathed as he had taught me and tried to keep my thoughts from drifting. Presently I was aware that a black lioness was walking across the ground behind me, but I did not turn round. Whatever it was I had been afraid of, my fear had gone. There were flowers in the narrow garden where I sat. I walked up a cobbled street at night in rain, and saw the rain blown against a high red wall over the street in the faint light from a window across the way. I was in the sunlit courtyard of a house I knew, my house, and a young girl came to greet me, smiling; it gave me great joy to see her face. I stood in a river, the current pushing me nearly off my feet, and on my shoulders was a heavy burden, so heavy I could barely stand up as the water pushed at me, and the sand under my feet slipped and slid. I staggered and took a step forward. I was kneeling on the deck of the hut in Reed Isles. It was evening. A last flight of wild duck passed across the reddish cloud cover where the sun had set.

Dorod’s hand was on my shoulder. “Come in,” he said in a low voice. “You’ve made a long journey.”

He was silent and gentle with me that night. He asked nothing about what I had seen. He made sure I ate well, and sent me to sleep.

Over the next days I told him my visions, little by little, and over and over. He knew how to draw from me things I would not have thought to tell, things I didn’t even know I’d seen until he made me recall the vision again, closer, seeking details, as if studying a picture. In this I felt my two kinds of memory come together into one.

And several times during those days I “journeyed,” as he put it, again. It was as if a door stood open that I could go through, not at will, but at the lion’s will.

“I don’t see how my visions can be of use or guidance to our clan,” I said to Dorod one evening. “They’re always of other places, other times—

almost nothing of the Marshes. What use can they be here?”

We were out fishing. Our contributions to the fish-mat had been rather poor lately, and what the women gave us had been correspondingly meager. We had thrown out the net and were drifting a while before we began to pull it in.

“You are still making the journeys of a child,” Dorod said.

“What do you mean?”

“The child sees only with his own eyes. He sees what is before him—places he will come to. As he learns to journey as a man, he learns to see more widely. He learns to see what other eyes may see, he sees where others will come. He goes where he will never himself go in his body. All the world, all places, all times are open to the great seer. He walks with Amba and flies with Hassa. He journeys with the Lord of the Waters.” He said all this quite matter-of-factly. He looked round at me with a quick, shrewd glance. “Untaught, beginning so late, you see as a child sees. I can teach you how to make the greater journeys. But only if you trust me.”

“Do I distrust you?”

“Yes,” he said calmly.

My aunt had said something to me about remembering myself but going no further. I could have found her words in my memory if I looked for them, but I did not look for them. Dorod was right: if I was to learn from him I must do it his way.

We pulled in our net. We were in luck. We brought two big carp to the fish-mat. I found carp a bony, muddy fish, but the women of Reed Isles were fond of it, and we were given a good dinner that night.

After we’d eaten it, I asked Dorod, “How will you teach me to see beyond the child’s visions?”

He didn’t answer for a long time. “You must be ready,” he said at last.

“What will make me ready?”

“Obedience and trust.”

“Do I disobey you?”

“Only in your heart.”

“How do you know that?”

He looked at me with something like scorn or pity, and said nothing.

“What must I do, then? How do I prove I trust you?”

“Obedience.”

“Tell me what to do and I’ll do it.”

I did not like this battle of wills, I did not want it, but it was what he wanted. And having got what he wanted, he changed his tone. He spoke very seriously. “You need not go on, Gavir,” he said. “It is a hard way, the seer’s way. Hard and fearful. I will always be with you, but you are the one who makes the journey. I can guide you to the beginning of the way, but after that I can only follow. It is your will that dares, your eye that sees. If you wish not to make the greater journeys, so be it. I will not force you—I cannot. If you want, leave me tomorrow, go back to East Lake. Your child-visions will return sometimes, but they will soon begin to fade; you will lose them, lose the power. Then you can live as an ordinary man. If that is what you want.”

Much taken aback, confused, challenged, I said, “No. I told you, I want to know my power.”

“You will know it,” he said with a quiet exultation.

From that night on he was both gentler with me and even more exacting. I was determined to obey him without question, to find if I could, indeed, learn to know my power. He asked me again to fast every third day. He controlled my diet very strictly, allowing me no milk or grain, but adding certain foods that he said were sacred: the eggs of duck and other wild fowl, a root called shardissu, and eda, a small fungus that sprang up in the willow groves inland—all eaten raw. He spent a great deal of time obtaining these foods. The shardissu and eda were vile-tasting and left me sick and dizzy, but I had to eat only tiny quantities of each.

After some days of this diet, and many hours of kneeling daily, I began to feel a lightness of body and mind, a sense of floating free. As I knelt on the deck of the hut I would say the word “hassa, hassa,” over and over, and feel myself lifted on the wings of the wild goose, the swan.

I knelt on the deck and saw all the Marshes beneath me, and the cloud shadows drifting over them. I saw villages on the shores of lakes, and fishing boats out on the water. I saw the faces of children, of women, of men. I crossed a great river with a burden on my shoulders, borne down, heavy laden, and threw off the burden and found my wings again, the heron’s wings. I flew and flew . . . and landed sick and cold and stiff, my knees afire with pain, my head dull, my belly aching, on the deck of Dorod’s house.

He helped me up. He brought me in by the tiny fire in the clay pot, for winter was coming on. He comforted me and praised me. He fed me translucent slices of raw fish and vegetables, beaten egg, a bit of sickening shardissu, a draft of water to take the evil taste out of my mouth. “She gave me milk,” I said, remembering the woman in the inn when I first came to the Marshes, longing for the taste of milk. All my memories were with me all night. I lay in Dorod’s hut as I sat beside my sister in the schoolroom of Arcamand while the storm destroyed the village called Herru, tearing the roofs and reedcloth walls from the posts in utter darkness full of screaming voices and the howl of wind. . . .

I was very sick, vomiting again and again, lying on my belly on the deck vomiting into the mud below, writhing with the pain in my stomach and lungs. Dorod knelt by me, his hand on my back, telling me it was all right, it would be over soon and I could sleep. I slept and my dreams were visions. I woke and remembered what I had never known. He asked me to tell him all I had seen, and I tried, but even as I told him new visions came to me and he and the hut were gone, I was gone, lost among people and places I would never know and could never remember. And then I would be lying in the dark hut, sick and aching and dizzy, hardly able to sit up. He would come and give me water and make me eat a little, talk to me and try to make me talk. “You are a brave man, my Gavir, you will be a great seer,” he told me, and I clung to him, the only face that was not a dream or vision or memory, the only actual face, the only hand I could hold, my guide and savior, my false guide, my betrayer.

There came another face among the dreams and visions. I knew her. I knew her voice. But did I not know all the faces, all the voices? I remembered everything, everything. Cuga stooped over me. Hoby came at me down the corridor. But she was there, I knew her, and I spoke her name: “Gegemer.”

Her crow’s face was grim, her crow’s eyes black and sharp. “Nephew,” she said. “I told you that if I saw you in vision I’d tell you of it. You remember that.”

I remembered everything. She had told me that before. All this had happened before. I was remembering it because it had happened a hundred times, like everything else. I was lying down because I was too tired from journeying to sit up. Dorod was sitting cross-legged near me. The hut was

dark and cramped. My aunt was not in the hut, it was a man's hut and she was a woman: she knelt in the doorway, she must stop at the threshold. She looked at me and spoke to me in her harsh voice.

"I saw you cross a river, carrying a child. Do you understand me, Gavir Aytana? I saw the way you are to go. If you look, you'll see it. It is the second river you must cross. If you can cross it, you'll be safe. Across the first river is danger for you. Across the second, safety. Across the first river, death will follow you. Across the second river, you will follow life. Do you understand me? Do you hear me, my sister's son?"

"Take me with you," I whispered. "Take me with you!"

I felt Dorod move forward to come between us.

"You've given him eda," my aunt said to Dorod. "What else have you poisoned him with?"

I managed to sit up, and stand. I staggered to the doorway, though Dorod got up to stop me. "Take me with you," I cried out to my aunt. She caught the hand I reached out to her and pulled me out of the house. I could barely stay afoot. She put her arm around me.

"Wasn't one boy enough to kill?" she said to Dorod, savage as the crow that attacks the nest-robbing hawk. "Give me what is his from your hut and let him go with me, or I'll shame you before the elders of Aytanu and the women of your own village so your shame will never be forgotten!"

"He will be a great seer," Dorod said, shivering with rage, but not moving from the doorway of the hut. "A man of power. Let him stay with me. I won't give him the eda again."

"Gavir," she said, "choose."

I did not know what they were saying, but I said to her, "Take me with you."

"Give me what is his," she said to Dorod.

Dorod turned away. He came back to the doorway presently with my knife, my fishing gear, the book wrapped in reedcloth, the ragged blanket. He set them down on the decking in front of the doorway. He was sobbing aloud, tears running down his face. "May evil follow you, evil woman," he cried. "Filth! You know nothing. You have no business with sacred things. You defile all you touch. Filth! Filth! You have polluted my house."

She said nothing, but helped me pick up my things, helped me get down from the deck and walk out the small pier where she had tied her boat, a

woman's boat, light as a leaf. I clambered down into it, trembling, and crouched in it. All the time I heard Dorod's voice cursing Gegemer with the foul words men use for women. As she cast off the rope he cried out, howling in rage and grief—"Gavir! Gavir!"

I huddled down with my head in my arms, hiding from him. It was silent then. We were out on the water. It was raining a little. I was too sick and weak and cold to lift my head. I lay huddled against the thwart. The visions came around me, swarming, faces, voices, places, cities, hills, roads, skies, and I began again to journey on and journey on.

♦

FOR GEGEMER TO COME to Dorod's house and stand at his very threshold had been an act of transgression barely justified by the urgency of her message to me. She could not bring me into the women's village of East Lake; she could not enter the men's village herself. She took me to an unused marriage hut between the villages, made the bed up for me, and left me there, coming to look after me a couple of times a day—a common enough arrangement when a man fell ill and a wife or sister wanted to nurse or visit him.

So I lay in the tiny, flimsy hut, the wind flapping the reedcloth walls, the rain beating on them and dripping between the reed bundles of the roof. I shivered and raved or lay in stupor. I don't know how long I had stayed with Dorod, or how long my recovery took, but it was summer when I went with him, and when I began to come to myself, be myself again, it was early spring. I was so thin and wasted my arms looked like reed stems. When I tried to walk I panted and got dizzy. It took me a long time to get my appetite back.

My aunt told me something about the drugs Dorod had given me. She spoke of them with hatred, with spite. "I took eda," she said. "I was determined to know where your mother went. I listened to what the seermen told me, the wise men in the Big House, may they choke on their words, may they eat mud and drown in quicksand. Take eda, they said, and your mind will be free, you will fly where you will! The mind flies, yes, but the belly pays, and the mind too. Fool that I was, I never saw your mother, but I was sick for a month, two months, from a single mouthful.

How much did he give you, how often? And bile root, shardissu—that makes you dizzy and your heart beats too hard, and your breath comes short—I never took it, but I know it. I know what men do to each other and call it sacred medicine!" She hissed like a cat. "Fools," she said. "Men. Women. All of us."

I was sitting in the doorway of the hut and she nearby on a wicker seat she'd brought with her; the women made such light, folding seats of cane and carried them to sit in, anywhere outdoors. The ground was still wet from recent rain, but the sky was pale radiant blue, and there was a new warmth to the sun.

My aunt and I were at ease with each other. I knew she had saved my life, and so did she. I think that knowledge softened her self-reproach for having let my mother go to her death. Gegemer was harsh, hard, with a bitter temper, but her care of me in my illness had been patient, even tender. Often she and I didn't understand each other, but it didn't matter; there was an understanding beneath words, a likeness of mind beneath all differences. One thing we both knew without ever saying: that when I was well enough, I would leave the Marshes.

I was in no hurry, but she was. She had seen me going north with death pursuing me. I must go. I must cross the second river to be safe. I must go as soon as I could. She said that to me at last.

"No matter when I go," I said, "death will pursue me."

"Eng, eng, eng," she said, shaking her head fiercely, frowning. "If you put off going too long, death will be waiting for you!"

"Then I'll stay here," I said, half joking. "Why should I leave my kin and clan and go running after death? I like my people here. I like to fish . . ."

I was teasing her, of course, and she knew it and didn't really mind, but she had seen what she had seen and I had not. She couldn't make light of it.

And among all the meaningless, endless swarming of visions that I lived with while I was with Dorod and when I was first back in East Lake, there was one that I remembered with particular exactness and clarity. I am waist deep in a river that tugs at my legs and feet, trying to pull me with its current, and on my back is a heavy weight that constantly unbalances me. I take a step forward, directly towards the riverbank, but it is wrong—

I know it at once—the sand is unstable, there is no footing there. I cannot see where to go, through the rush and swirl of the water, but I take a step to the right, and another, and then on that way, as if following some path under the water, one step after the other, against all the force of the current—and that is all. I see no more.

This remembering, this vision, came back to me again as I began to recover my health. It was, I think, the last of the visions of my illness. I told it to Gegemer when she came the next day. She winced and shuddered as I told her.

"It is the same river," she murmured.

I shivered too when she said that.

"I saw you there," she said. "It is a child you carry, riding on your back." After a long time she said, "You will be safe, sister's son. You will be safe." Her voice was low and rough, and she spoke with so much yearning that I took her words not as prophecy but only as her desire.

I had been a fool indeed to go off with Dorod, poor Dorod who had waited for me and wanted me only for his own sake, to make him important among his people, a seerman, a dealer in destiny, a person of power. I had turned my back on Gegemer, who even if she hardly knew it had truly waited for me, truly wanted me, not to make her great, but for love's sake.

I was well enough to go back to my uncle's house by April, though not well enough yet to go any farther. The last day I stayed at the marriage hut, my aunt came by for no reason but to say goodbye. We sat in front of the house in the sunlight, and I said, "Mother's sister, may I tell you of my sister?"

"Sallo," she said in a whisper. The name of a child of two or three, a lost child.

"She was my guardian and defender. She was always brave," I said. "She couldn't remember the Marshes, she didn't know anything about our people, but she knew we had powers the others didn't have. She told me never to tell them, the others, of my visions. She was wise. She was beautiful—there isn't a girl in the village as beautiful as Sallo was. Or as kind, and loving, and true-hearted." And seeing how intently my aunt listened, I talked on, trying to tell her what Sallo had looked like, how she had spoken, what she had been to me. It did not take very long. It is hard to

say what a person is. And Sallo's life had been too short to make much of a story. She had not lived as long even as I had lived now.

When I fell silent, partly because I could not speak for the tears I wanted to cry, Gegemer said, "Your sister was like my sister." And she laid her dark hand on my dark hand for one moment.

So once more I gathered up my little bundle, blanket, gear, knife, book, and walked back to the men's village, to my uncle's house. Metter welcomed me with calm kindness. Prut came to meet me waving his tail, and as soon as I put my old blanket on my cot he jumped up onto it and began to knead it industriously, purring like a windmill. But there was no courteous greeting from old Minki. She had died in the winter, Metter told me sadly. And old Peroc, too, had died, alone in his house. Metter had gone one morning to give him a net to mend, and found him sitting bent over by his cold fire pot, his work in his cold hands.

"There's a litter of puppies in Rava's house," Metter said after a while. "We might go look them over tomorrow."

We did that, and chose a fine, upstanding, bright-eyed puppy whose black coat curled as tight as lamb's wool. Metter named her Bo, and took her out fishing that same day. Just as he pushed off she leapt into the water and began paddling along beside the boat. He fished her out and spoke to her severely, while she wagged her tail in joyful unrepentance. I wanted to be with them, but I wasn't strong enough to go out fishing yet; just the walk to Rava's house had left me out of breath and shaky. I sat down on the deck in the sunshine and watched the little moth-wing sail of Metter's boat grow smaller and smaller on the silky blue water of the lake. It was good to be here. This house, I thought, was probably as near home as I'd ever come.

But it wasn't my home. I didn't want to live my life here. That was clear to me now. I had been born with two gifts, two powers. One of them belonged here; it was a power the Marsh people knew, knew how to train and use. But my training in it had failed, whether through my teacher's ignorance and impatience, or because my power of vision was in fact not great, but only the gift, common enough here, of seeing, sometimes, a little way ahead. A child's gift, a wild gift, that could not be trained or counted on, and that would grow weaker as I grew older.

And my other power, though reliable, was utterly useless here. What good was a head full of stories and histories and poetry? The less a man of the Rassiu said, the more he was respected. Stories were for women and children. Songs were secrets, sung only at the terrifying sacred rites of initiation. These were not people of the word. They were people of the vision and the moment. All I had learned from books was wasted among them. Was I then to forget it all, betray my memory, and let my mind and spirit, too, dwindle away and grow weaker as I grew older?

The people who stole me from my people had stolen my people from me. I could never wholly be one of them.

To see that was to see that I must go on.

Where to go, then?

North, Gegemer said. She saw me going north. Across two great rivers. The Somulane and the Sensaly, those would be. Asion was north and west of the Somulane, in Bendile; the city of Mesun lay on the north bank of the Sensaly, in Urdile. There was a great university in Mesun. Scholars, poets lived there. The poet Orrec Caspro lived there.

I got up and went into the little house. Prut was working on my old blanket, his eyes half closed and his claws going in and out and in and out and his windmill running. I reached across him and took from the shelf the little reedcloth packet, brought it outside and sat down cross-legged with it. I thought of the hours, days, months I had spent on my knees on Dorod's deck, and swore in my heart that I'd never kneel again. I wished I had one of the women's legless wicker chairs, but men did not use women's things. Women used and did what there was to use and do, but men shunned and despised a great many things, such as wicker chairs and cooking and storytelling, depriving themselves of many skills and pleasures, in order to prove that they weren't women. Wouldn't it be better to prove it by doing, rather than by not doing?

Better for me, not for them. I was not one of them.

I sat cross-legged, then, and unwrapped the silky reedcloth from the book. And for the first time in how long—a year, two years?—I opened it. I opened the book where it opened, letting it choose the page, and read.

In the domain of the Lord of the Waters
the rushes grow, the green reeds grow.

Hassa! hassa!
Swans fly over the waters, calling,
over the green reeds, the rushes.
Hassa! hassa!
Grey herons fly over the marshes
and shadows pass under their wings.
Under the clouds pass shadows,
over the marshlands, over the islands
of reeds and ricegrass. Blessed
are the wings of the waterbirds,
blessed the realm of the Lord of the Waters,
the Lord of the Springs and Rivers.

I closed the book and closed my eyes, leaning back against the doorpost, letting the sunlight flow through my eyelids, through my bones. How did he know? How did he know what it was like here? How did he know the sacred name of the swan and heron? Was Orrec Caspro a Rassiu, a Marshman? Was he a seer?

I fell asleep with the murmur of the lines in my mind. I woke when Bo jumped into my lap and washed my face enthusiastically. Metter was just climbing up onto the deck. “What’s that?” he said, looking with mild curiosity at the book.

“A box of words,” I said. I held it up and showed it to him. He shook his head and said, “Anh, anh.”

“Any ritta today?”

“No. Just perch and a pikelet. I need you to go out with me for ritta. Are you coming to the fish-mat?”

I went with him there, and talked with Tisso afterwards. I was glad to see her, and we talked for quite a while, sitting near the gardens. Later that evening, watching the sunset from the deck of our house, I knew with sudden sharp embarrassment and unease that Tisso was ready to fall in love with me, even though I hadn’t yet had my second initiation, even though I still looked as if I was made of black sticks, and was a failed seer, a man of no accomplishments.

Metter was shaving. Men of the Marshes don’t have much in the way of beards; my uncle shaved by pulling out random hairs with a clamshell as

tweezers and a black bowl filled with water as a mirror. He clearly enjoyed the process. When he was done he handed me the clamshell. I was surprised, but when I felt my jaw and peered into the bowl I saw that I had sprouted some curly black beard hairs. I pulled them out one by one. It was, in fact, enjoyable. Almost all small daily acts here were enjoyable. I would miss the peacefulness of sitting here with my peaceful uncle. But I was now all the more sure that I must leave.

I could not go till I had my strength back, that was clear. So for the rest of the spring I kept to a steady regime. I stayed almost entirely in the men's village; I went to the fish-mat and spoke to people there, but did not go walking with the young men and women. When I walked to strengthen my legs and get my wind back, I went alone, miles along the lakeshore. I took up Peroc's craft of mending nets, which I could do sitting down, and though I was not very good at it, the nets I mended were better than nothing, and it gave me some usefulness to my village.

Before long I was able to go line-fishing with Metter and help him train Bo, though the little dog hardly needed training. Retrieving was bred into her brain and bone; the first time a fish, a big perch, took the hook off my line, Bo was into the water, under the water, and bobbed up with the struggling fish held delicately in her jaws, offering it to me, before I even knew I'd lost it.

Every morning and evening I sat out on the deck, under the lifted house wall if it was raining, and read a few pages in my book. Prut, who was getting older and lazier, often took this opportunity to sit on my lap. Then my uncle and I ended the day with the brief reverence-dance and words of praise to the Lord of the Waters, which I had learned when I first lived in the village; and we went to bed.

So the days passed. It was high summer, past the solstice. I didn't think about my need to leave the village. I had no needs. I was content.

My aunt came to me, stalking around the fish-mat, glaring like an angry crow. Little children scattered in fear before her. "Gavir!" she said. "Gavir, I saw a man. A man pursuing you. A man who is your death."

I stared at her.

"You must go, sister's son!"

PART FOUR

Chapter 14

MY AUNT told everyone I was obeying her vision and would leave the day after tomorrow. When I went next day to the fish-mat for the last time, Tisso's mother was waiting to offer me a blanket woven of reed treated so that the fibers were fuzzy and made a thick, soft texture, warm as wool. "My daughter wove it," Lali Betu said, and I said, "I thank her for it and will think of you both when the nights are cold." Tisso hung back and did not try to speak to me. I said goodbye to the women and spoke briefly with my aunt. She did not want to talk, she wanted me to be gone, to get across the second river and be safe.

I left early the next morning before my uncle got up. The puppy was sleeping on his feet. Prut was curled up on my old blanket. I whispered, "Go with Mé," to them all and slipped out of the little house and away from my village. My heart was heavy in me.

I went overland, eastward. My aunt would have disapproved, wanting me to hurry straight to the north. I refused to let her fear drive me. I had no boat, and heading north on foot, I'd have to take a maze of a way through the Marshes, endless days of walking. I had no money with me and no means of earning it while I traveled.

But it was in my mind that I did have money. Blood money, guilt money, the payment for my sister's death. I had left it with Cuga, hidden in his cave. It would be enough to take me to Mesun, if I lived light, and I was used to living light. I knew the way that I'd walked with Chamry and Venne; I could keep east of the Heart of the Forest, so as not to run into Barna's guards, when I got that far north. The tricky part would be finding Cuga's cave, south of the Daneran Forest. I was sure my gift of memory would guide me when I came among the hills and valleys I had known that summer—if I could find them.

I had a backpack stuffed with wayfarer's food, dried smoked fish, hard cheese, hard bread, dried fruit: the women at the fish-mat had offered me more food than I could ever use, the men of my village had come to Metter's hut to share with me their little hoards of travel supplies. I had no fear of going hungry for days to come. Besides the food and my new blanket, I carried as always my fishing gear, my knife, and the book, wrapped safe in waterproof reedcloth to protect it when I had to ford or swim. I was fit again, able to walk steadily all day and to enjoy it.

Within two days I came out of the Marshes into a rising, thinly wooded country. I kept bearing east now; as well as I could judge, I was not far north of the city of Casicar. I saw a few farmsteads in the distance, desolate-looking places. Cattle and sheep were scattered out in the valleys, not many of them. I passed orchards that had been burned, a ruined farmhouse. Armies had come through here, looting and laying waste, the endlessly warring armies of the City States. . . . There were no roads, only tracks, and I saw no people but an occasional herdsman or shepherd. We spoke or waved, and I went on.

The land continued to rise, and now I was in the hilly, broken, wild country I was looking for. The problem was finding the piece of it I wanted. I had no idea of the direction Cuga's cave lay from where I was now. The woods were thick enough that there was never an overview of the hills. All I could do was go forward, following my nose. As the sun began getting low and golden through the trees that day, I felt myself completely lost—walking at random. My plan was hopeless. I could wander in these hills till I became as weak and crazy as I had been when I first came into them. I sat down to eat a little and put some heart in myself, planning to go on as long as the light lasted before I found a sheltered place to sleep. As I sat down in a little clearing, my back against a young oak, I said with a sigh, "Oh, Ennu, guide me now."

I split a lump of hard bread with my knife, laid a thin slice of smoked fish on it, and ate it slowly, tasting salt and smoke and thinking of my village. I looked up at some movement and saw a black lion come into the clearing about twenty feet from me. It was a lioness, pacing with her head and her long tail low. She stopped and looked straight at me. I said, with no voice, "Ennu-Amba," naming her. She gazed a moment longer and then walked on. She vanished almost at once in the thickets.

After a while I finished my dinner. I wrapped up the fish and put it carefully away in my pack. I licked my greasy fingers and wiped them on the deer fern amidst which I sat. My mouth was dry, and I drank from the little bottle of lacquered reedcloth I had refilled at the last stream. I got up slowly. It seemed to me that I had only one way to go: that was to follow the lion. It did not seem a wise thing to do, but I was in a place where wisdom, maybe, was no use. I followed the lion.

Once I was through the thickets, the way she had gone appeared to be a faint path that went through open oak woods along the top of a long, winding hill, easy walking with fairly good visibility. I did not see the lion again. I went on steadily for a long time. The sun was striking level through the trees when I recognised where I was. Cuga had led me through this glade—past that enormous, ancient oak—when he took me to meet the Forest Brothers. We were in Cugamand, I thought, and then wondered why I had thought "we," not "I." All I had to do to reach the cave was turn off the lion's road and follow the way I knew, downward and to the right.

I stopped and thanked Ennu, then turned to the right and went down through woods I knew with increasing familiarity, until I came to the home stream and crossed it and stood before the rockslide that held and concealed the door of the cave. Sunset light was bright on the tops of the trees.

I started to say his name, but I knew with absolute certainty that he was not there. I said nothing. After a while I went in through the narrow entrance. My eyes found only darkness in the cave. The smell of smoke and badly cured fur, Cuga's reek, Cuga's stink, was there, but faint, a kind of echo of a smell. It was cold in that darkness. There was no light. I went back outside. The evening seemed marvelously bright and warm, and I remembered the blinding glory of daylight the first time I ever left the cave.

I put my pack down by the cave door and took my water bottle to fill it at the stream. I drank, and filled the bottle, and squatted there for a while; and as I watched the flow and movement of the water in the gathering twilight, I saw him on the bank of the stream.

Animals and the water and weather of a year or two years had not left very much of him: his skull, with the forehead broken in, and other bones, a couple of scraps of moldy fur clothing, and his leather belt.

I touched the skull where it lay, and stroked it a little, talking to Cuga. The light was failing fast and I was very tired. I did not want to sleep in the cave. I rolled up in my reedcloth blanket in a grassy bay of the great rock formation and slept deep and long.

In the morning I went into the cave, thinking to bury him there; but it was so cheerless that it seemed better to let him be where he was. I dug a small grave high enough above the stream to be out of the winter floods. I gathered his bones into it, and his belt, and one of his knives I found in the cave, and the metal box of salt that had been his greatest treasure. He'd kept it hidden all the time I was with him, and I was never to know where, for I found it lying out on the floor of the fireplace cave. There was still a little salt in the bottom of the box. In it also was one of his two prized knives, and the small, heavy bag of money that I had left with him and he had kept for me.

It was a relief to my heart to know that he hadn't been killed for the sake of that money. From the fact that he'd taken the things out and not put them away again, I imagined that maybe having been hurt or feeling ill, he'd wanted to look at his treasures. But when he knew he was dying, he left them and went to die outside, in the place he liked to sit beside the stream.

I covered the small grave over, smoothing the dirt with my hands, and asked Ennu to guide him. I put the bag of money in the bottom of my pack without opening it. I said farewell and set off, back up the way that led north and east to the hill where I had first met the Forest Brothers.

Ever since I left East Lake I had felt very lonely. Solitude had always been a pleasure to me, but it had been a rare and relative solitude—almost always there had been others nearby, in reach. This was different, this aloneness. To have once again walked away from my own people, from all I knew—to know that wherever I went I would always be among strangers—no matter how I tried to tell myself it was freedom, it felt like desolation. That day I left Cugamand was the hardest of all. I plodded on and plodded on, finding the way without thinking about it. When I got to the top of the hill where Cuga had left me, it was time to stop. I stopped. I made no fire, for I didn't want to bring the Forest Brothers or anybody else. I had to go alone, and I would. But I lay there that night and grieved. I grieved for myself, and for Cuga. And I grieved for my people in East

Lake, Tisso and Gegemer and my kind, lazy uncle—all of them. And for Chamry Bern, and Venne, and Diero, and even Barna, for I had loved Barna. And for my people of Arcamand, Sotur, Tib and Ris and little Oco, Astano, Yaven, my teacher Everra, and Sallo, my Sallo, lost—all of them lost to me. I was heavy with tears I could not cry, and my head ached. The great stars of summer slid slowly to the west. I slept at last.

I woke with dawn, the sky a transparent pink hill of light over the dark hill of earth. I was hungry and thirsty. I got up and made up my pack and went on down the hillside, and at the creek in the hollow, where Brigin had not let me drink my fill, I drank my fill. I was alone—so, then, I'd go alone, and live my life as I saw fit. I'd drink where I wanted to drink. I'd go to Mesun, where all men were free men, and where the University taught wisdom, and the poet Caspro lived.

I tried to sing his hymn to Liberty as I strode along, but I never could sing, and my voice in the silence and birdsong of the woods sounded like a young crow squawking. Instead, I let the words of his poems come into my head and come with me on my way, making a quieter music to keep me company.

Things change fast in a forest, trees fall, young trees shoot up, brambles grow across the path, but the way was always clear enough when I looked for it and let my memory tell me where I'd gone. I came to the clearing where we'd picked up the venison, and ate my midday dinner there. I wished I had some of that venison. My pack was getting all too light. I wondered if I should begin to veer eastward again, to come out of the Daneran Forest and try my luck at buying food in a village or a town. But I didn't want to do that yet. I'd stay in the forest, making a wide pass around Brigin's camp, if it was still there, taking the way Chamry had taken us till I got to a safe distance from Barna's city. Then I'd head northeast to find one of the villages outside the forest, on the Somulane, the first of the two great rivers I was to cross.

My plan went well until I was more or less east of Barna's city, following the Somulane as it took a northerly bend through the forested hills. I was pretty hungry, and there were backwaters of the river in which I could see trout swimming as plain as pigeons flying in the sky. It was too much for me. I stopped at a lovely pool, put my rod together, baited my hook with a caddis fly, and caught a good fish in no time. And a second

one in not much more than no time. I was just casting my line again when somebody said, “Gav?”

I jumped, lost my bait, grabbed for my knife, and stared at the man who stood behind me. For a moment I didn’t know him, then I recognised Ater—one of the raiders who had caught Irad and Melle—they’d told the story in the beer house—he’d said he liked his women soft . . . A big, heavy man he had been then, but he was a big, gaunt man now. I stared at him in terror, but there was no threat in his gaze. He looked dully surprised.

“How’d you get here, Gav?” he said. “I thought you drowned, or went off. Before.”

“Went off,” I said.

“You coming back, then?”

I shook my head.

“Nothing much to come back to,” he said.

He looked at my two fish. I knew how hunger looks at food.

“What do you mean, Ater?” I said when I began to realise what he’d said.

He turned his hands out in a helpless gesture. “Well,” he said. “You know.” I stared at him. He stared at me. “It’s all burned down,” he said.

“The city? The Heart of the Forest? Burned down?”

It was hard for him to understand that I didn’t know about the event that loomed so immense in his life. It took me a while to get much sense out of him.

My first concern was that other men would be following him, that Barna’s guards would be on me, take me captive, but he just kept saying, “No. Nobody’s coming. They’re all gone. Nobody’s coming.” He said, “I came over to that village we used to go to, see if there was some food there, but they burned it too.”

“Who?”

“The soldiers.”

“Casicar?”

“I guess so.”

Getting information out of him was going to be a slow business. I said, “Is it safe to make a fire?”

He nodded.

“Make one, then, and put the fish on a stick and toast them. I’ve got a little bread here.” I succeeded in landing another big trout while he made the fire. He could hardly wait to char the fish over the fire. He ate with desperate haste, cramming the hard bread into his mouth and chewing it painfully. “Ah,” he said, “ah, that’s good, thanks, Gav. Thanks.”

I went back to fishing after we ate; when the trout jump at an empty hook it’s a sin not to let them do it. While I fished he sat on the bank and told me what had happened to the Heart of the Forest. Much of the story I had to guess from his incoherent telling.

Etra and Casicar were allies now, in a Northern League against Votus, Morva, and smaller cities south of the Morr. A lot of farm slaves had been killed during the wars between Etra and Casicar, or had run away, and had to be replaced or recaptured. Towns all round the Daneran Forest had long been full of rumors of the great camp or city of runaway slaves, and the new allies decided to go in and find out what was there. They sent an army, a legion from each city, on a rapid march up between Daneran and the Marshes. Barna’s people knew nothing about the attack until outpost guards came running into the city shouting the warning.

Barna gathered all the men who would stand with him to defend the Heart of the Forest. He ordered the women and children to scatter out in the woods. Many of the men ran with them. Any who hesitated or stayed to fight were soon trapped: the soldiers surrounded the walls and methodically set them afire, and then the whole city, hurling torches onto the roofs of the wooden buildings. Barna’s men made a sortie against them but were outnumbered, cut down, slaughtered. The soldiers ringed the burning town and caught all who fled the holocaust, then ranged out and rounded up people hiding or trying to escape in the woods. They spent a couple of nights waiting till the fires burnt out so they could loot what was left. They found the treasury and divided that. They divided the prisoners, half for Etra, half for Casicar, and then marched back, driving the chained slaves along with the cattle and sheep.

There were tears on Ater’s cheeks as he told me the story, but his voice remained dull and even. He’d been out with a raiding party when they saw the smoke of the burning city from miles away in the north. They had crept back a couple of days after the soldiers left.

“Barna . . . ,” I said, and Ater said, “They said the soldiers cut off his head and kicked it around like a ball.”

It was very hard to ask about any of the others. When I did, Ater had no answers; often he seemed not even to know who I was talking about. Chamry? He shrugged. Venne? He didn’t know. Diero? He didn’t know. But evidently a number of people had escaped one way or another, and many of them had regathered in the ruined city, not knowing where else to go. Some of the grain supplies had remained hidden and untouched, and they had lived off them and what was left of the gardens. For how long? Again Ater was vague. I guessed that the raid and fire had been about half a year ago, perhaps in early winter.

“You’re going back there now?” I asked him, and he nodded. “It’s safer there,” he said. “The soldiers been raiding everywhere. Taking slaves. I was at Ebbera, over there. Near as bad off as we are. No slaves left to work the fields.”

“I’ll come with you,” I said. I had to know what had become of my friends.

I’d caught five more good-sized fish. I packed them up in leaves and we set off. We came to the Heart of the Forest in the late afternoon.

The city I had last seen silver-blue in moonlight was a waste of charred beams, shapeless mounds, ashfields. At one edge, near the gardens, people had made huts and shelters with salvaged lumber, much of it half burned. An old woman was weeding in the garden, bowed back, averted face. A couple of men sat in the doorways of their huts, their hands hanging between their knees. A dog barked at us, then whined and cowered away. A child sat on the dirt gazing listlessly at Ater and me. As we came near, it too cowered away from us.

I had come in order to ask about my friends, but I could not ask. I could only see Diero trapped in Barna’s house as it burned, Chamry’s corpse dumped in a common grave, Venne driven down the road in chains. I said to Ater, “I can’t stay here.” I gave him the packet of fish. “Share it with somebody,” I said.

“Where you going then?” he asked in his blank way.

“North.”

“Look out for slave takers,” Ater said.

I was about to turn back the way we'd come, when something grabbed both my legs so hard and suddenly that I nearly lost my balance. It was a child, the child who'd stared and shrunk from us. "Beaky, Beaky, Beaky," she cried in a high thin voice like a bird. "Oh Beaky, oh Beaky."

I had to pry her hands loose from my legs, and then she gripped my hands with sparrow-claw fingers, looking up into my face, her face all dust and bone and tears.

"Melle?"

She pulled me to her. I picked her up. She weighed nothing, it was like picking up a ghost. She clung to me tightly, just as she used to when I came to Diero's room to teach her letters. She hid her face against my shoulder.

"Where does she live?" I asked Ater, who had stopped to stare at us. He pointed to a hut nearby. I started to carry her towards it.

"Don't go there," she whispered, "don't go there."

"Where do you live then, Melle?"

"Nowhere."

A man looked from the doorway of the hut that Ater had pointed out. I'd seen him working as a carpenter but had never known his name. He too had the dull look, the siege face.

"Where's the girl's sister?" I asked him.

He shrugged.

"Diero didn't—escape—did she?"

The man shrugged again, this time with a grinning sneer at the question. Gradually his look sharpened. He said, "You want that one?"

I stared at him.

"Half a bronze for the night," he said. "Or food, if you've got any." He stepped forward, trying to get a look at my backpack.

I went through a quick, complex set of thoughts. I said, "What I have I keep," and set straight off walking back the way I'd come. Melle clung to my neck, silent, her face hidden.

The man shouted after me and the dog, barking, set off other dogs in a chorus of barks and howls. I drew my knife, glancing back constantly. But nobody followed us.

When I'd walked a half mile or so I knew that my little ghost was a great deal more solid than I'd thought, and also that I'd better think what I

was doing. Coming across the faint trace of a path, I went along it for some way, then turned aside. Behind a thicket of elderberries that screened us from the path, I set Melle down on her feet and sat down next to her to get my breath. She squatted down beside me. “Thank you for taking me away,” she said in a thread of a voice.

She would be seven or eight years old now, I thought. She hadn’t grown very much, and was so thin her joints looked like knobs. I got some dried fruit out of my pack and offered it to her. She ate it with a pitiful and terrible attempt not to be greedy. She held out a piece to me. I shook my head. “I ate a little while ago,” I said. She devoured the fruit. I cut a piece of my rock-hard bread into little morsels and warned her to suck them to soften them before she chewed. She sat with bread in her mouth, and her dirty, bony face began to relax.

“Melle,” I said, “I’m going north. Away. To a city called Mesun.”

“Please, can I come with you,” she whispered, her face tightening again, her eyes getting big, only daring one glance up at me.

“You don’t want to stay there, at—”

“Oh no, please no.” The same whisper. “Please no!”

“There’s nobody there who . . .”

She shook her head again and again.

“No, no, no,” she whispered.

I didn’t know what to do. That is, there was only one thing I could do, but I didn’t know how I was going to manage it.

“Are you pretty good at walking?”

“I can walk and walk,” she said earnestly. She put another little lump of bread in her mouth, timidly, and sucked it as I had told her to do.

“Well,” I said, “you’ll have to.”

“I will, I will. You won’t have to carry me. I promise.”

“That’s good. We ought to walk on a way now, because I want to get back to the river before dark. And tomorrow we’ll leave the forest. All right?”

“Yes!” she said, and her eyes shone. She stood right up.

She walked along bravely, but her legs were short, and she didn’t have much strength in her little starved body. Fortunately we reached the Somulane again sooner than I expected, coming down an open glade to a long bend in the river. The fishing there wasn’t like the wonderful pool

farther upstream, but I did catch a trout and a couple of perch, enough for our supper. The grass was soft and the light fell sweetly through the trees across the water, turning it to bronze. “It’s pretty here,” Melle said. She fell asleep as soon as she had eaten. She lay in a little heap on the grass. My heart turned over at the sight of her fragility. How could I take this child with me? But how could I not take her?

Luck hears prayers only with his deaf ear, but I spoke to him, to the ear that hears the wheels of the chariots of the stars. I said, “You used to be with me, Lord, when I didn’t know it. I hope you’re with this child now, and not just fooling her.” And I spoke in silence also to Ennu, thanking her and asking her to guide us. Then there was nothing to do but roll Melle up with me in my soft reedcloth blanket, and sleep.

We both woke as dawn was brightening. Melle went off by herself to the riverside, and when she came back she had managed to wash herself quite clean, and was shivering with wet and cold. I wrapped the blanket round her again while we ate a little breakfast. She was shy and solemn.

“Melle,” I said, “your sister . . .”

She said in a strange, small, even voice, “We tried to hide. Back of the sheep pastures. The soldiers found us. They took Irad away. I don’t remember.”

I remembered Barna’s raider telling how they had taken the two girls from their village, how Ater had been going to toss the little one aside, but they clung too tight together. . . . They hadn’t been able to hold on to each other this time.

Melle’s chin trembled. She looked down and chewed on her bit of hard bread but could not swallow. Neither of us could say anything more about Irad. After a long time I said, “Your village was over on the west side of the forest. Do you want to go back there?”

“To the village?” She looked up, and thought hard. “I can’t remember it much,” she said.

“But you had family there. Your mother—”

She shook her head. “We didn’t have any mother. We belonged to Gan Buli. He hit us a lot. My sister . . .” She didn’t finish.

Maybe Luck had been with Melle after all.

But never with Irad.

“All right, then you’ll come with me,” I said, in as matter-of-fact a tone as I could manage. “But listen. We’ll be going on the roads, into villages, some of the time at least. Among people. I think it might be better if you were my little brother. Can you pretend to be a boy?”

“Of course,” she said, interested in the idea. She thought about it. “I need a name. I can be Miv.”

I almost said, “No!” but stopped myself. She should have the name she chose herself. Like Melle, it was a common name.

“All right, Miv,” I said, with a little effort. “And I’m Avvi.”

“Avvi,” she repeated, and then murmured, “Avvi Beaky,” with a tiny smile.

“And who we are is this: we aren’t slaves, because there aren’t any slaves in Urdile, where we live. I’m a student at the University in Mesun. I study with a great man there, who’s waiting for us. I’m taking you there to be a student too. We come from just east of the Marshes.”

She nodded. It all seemed perfectly convincing to her. But she was eight years old.

“What I hope is, we can mostly keep off the big roads and just go through the countryside. I have some money. We can buy food in villages and from farmers. But we have to look out for slave takers. Everywhere. If we don’t meet any of them, we’ll be all right.”

“What is the great man in Mesun’s name?” she asked. A good question. I wasn’t prepared for it. Finally I said the only name of a great man in Mesun I knew: “Orrec Caspro.”

She nodded.

There seemed to be one more thing on her mind. She finally said it. “I can’t pee like a boy,” she said.

“That’s all right. Don’t worry. I’ll stand guard.”

She nodded. We were ready to go. A short way downstream from the bend of the river it widened and shoaled out, and I said, “Let’s cross here. Can you swim—Miv?”

“No.”

“If it gets too deep I can carry you.” We took off our shoes and tied them to my pack. I fastened a length of light rope around Melle’s waist and my own, with a few feet of slack between us. We waded out into the river hand in hand. I thought of my vision of crossing a river, and

wondered if soon I'd be carrying the child on my shoulders (which were still sore from carrying her yesterday). But this didn't at all look like the river I remembered. By picking a zigzag way on the high point of the shoals I was never more than waist deep, and could hold Melle up well enough, except in one place where the current ran fast and deep alongside an islet of gravel. There I told her to hold tight to the rope around my waist and keep her head up the best she could, and I waded in, swam the few yards to the gravel bar, and wallowed ashore. Melle went under only at the last moment, when she thought she could touch bottom and couldn't. She came up choking and sputtering. After that we had only shallow waters to wade, and soon came to the far shore.

As we sat getting our breath, drying out, and putting on our shoes, I said, "We've crossed the first of the two great rivers we have to cross. This is the land of Bendile."

"The hero Hamneda had to swim across a river when he was wounded, didn't he?"

I can't say how much that touched me. It wasn't that she'd learned the story of Hamneda from me. It was that she thought of him, that he was familiar to her mind and heart as he was to mine. We had a common language, this child and I, a language I hadn't spoken with anyone else since I left my own childhood in Etra. I put my arm around her little thin shoulders, and she wriggled against me comfortably.

"Let's go find a village and buy some food," I said. "Hold on, though. Let me get some money out so I don't wave all of it in people's faces." I dug into my pack and brought out the heavy little silk pouch. A faint, smoky Cuga-reek still clung to it, or maybe it had just been close to the smoked fish from Ferusi. I untied the cord, opened the pouch, and stared. I remembered what it had held: bronzes, and four silver pieces. But along with the bronzes there were now nine silver pieces, four of the gold pieces from Pagadi called dictators, and a broad gold coin from Ansul.

My Cuga had been a thief as well as a runaway.

"I can't carry this!" I said. I looked at the money with horror. All I saw was the danger it posed us if anyone should get the slightest notion that we carried such a fortune. It was in my mind to simply dump the gold pieces out in the grass and gravel and leave them.

"Did somebody give it to you?"

I nodded, speechless.

"You can sew up money in clothes to hide it," Melle said, handling the dictators with admiring curiosity. "These are pretty, but the big one is the prettiest. Have you got a needle and thread?"

"Only fish hooks and fishing line."

"Well, maybe I can get some sewing things in a village. Maybe there'll be a pedlar on the road. I can sew."

"So can I," I said stupidly. "Well, all I can do now is put it back. I wish I hadn't found it."

"Is it a lot of money?"

I nodded.

She was still studying the coins. "C—I—City of P—A—C—something —"

"Pagadi," I said.

"Oh, the words go all the way round. State and City of Pagadi Year 8 something." Her head was bent over the coin just as it had used to bend over her reading in Barna's house, in the lamplight in Diero's room. She looked up and smiled at me as she handed it back. Her eyes were luminous.

I kept out a few quarter- and half-bronzes and hid the pouch away again. We walked on up along the river, for there was a clear path. After we had gone for an hour or more, Melle said, "Maybe when we get to the city where we're going we can find out where my sister is and buy her from the soldiers with the gold."

"Maybe we can," I said, my heart twisting again.

Presently I added in my anxiety, "But we can't talk about it. At all."

"I won't," she said. She never did.

♦

FOLLOWING THE RIVER as it took a sharp turn north we came that afternoon to a fair-sized town. I summoned up my courage to enter it. Melle seemed quite fearless, trusting in my strength and wisdom. We walked boldly into the marketplace and bought ourselves food. I bought a blanket for Melle which she could also wear as a poncho, and haggled for a little case containing a stout needle and a hank of linen thread. People wanted to talk

with us, asking us where we were from and where we were bound. I told my story, and “student of the University” was mysterious enough to most people that they didn’t know what further questions to ask. The plump, snaggletoothed woman who was demanding a quarter-bronze for the thread and needle looked at Melle with compassion and said, “I can see it must be a terrible hard life for a little fellow, studenting!”

“He was sick all last winter,” I said.

“Was he then? What’s your name, sonny boy?”

“Miv,” Melle said calmly.

“I’m sure your brother takes good care of you and doesn’t let you walk too far,” the woman said. And perhaps because she’d seen that I wasn’t going to pay such a price as she asked, or for a better reason, she went on, “And this is for you, to keep you safe on your journey—a gift, a gift, I wouldn’t ask money of a child for the blessing of Ennu!” She held out a little figure of a cat, carved of dark wood, with a copper wire round its neck to hang it from as a pendant; there were several such little Ennu-Més on her tray. Melle looked up at me with big eyes. I remembered she and Irad had worn such figures on a necklace, though these were finer than what they’d had. I handed the woman her extortionate price and nodded to Melle to take the carving.

She clutched it in her hand and held her hand tight to the base of her throat.

I felt unexpectedly easy and safe in the marketplace. We were strangers among strangers, lost in a crowd, not isolated, solitary travelers in a wilderness. A booth was selling some kind of sweet fried cake that smelled delicious. “Let’s have some of that,” I said to Melle, and when we each had a hot cake in hand we sat down on the broad edge of a fountain in the shade to eat them. They were greasy and heavy, and Melle got through only about half of hers. I looked at her sidelong, seeing what the snaggletoothed woman had seen: that this was a very thin little child who looked on the point of exhaustion.

“Are you tired, Miv?” I said.

After a slight struggle with herself she hunched her shoulders and nodded.

“Let’s stay at an inn. We won’t often get a chance to, I expect. This is a nice town,” I said, recklessly. “You got cold crossing the river. You walked

a long way today. You deserve a real bed tonight."

She hunched up some more and looked down at her greasy cake. She showed it to me. "Can you eat it, Beaky?" she whispered.

"I can eat anything, Squeaky," I said, proving it. "Now come on. There was an inn back there just off the market square."

The innkeeper's wife took an interest in Melle—evidently my companion was a passport to people's sympathy. We were given a nice little room at the back of the house, with a wide, short bed. Melle climbed up on the bed at once and curled up. She still held her Ennu-Mé tight in her hand. She was wearing her new poncho and didn't want to take it off. "It keeps me warm," she said, but I saw she was shivering. I covered her over, and she fell asleep soon. I sat in the chair by the window. It was a long time since I'd sat in a chair, since I'd been in a great, solid house like this, very different from the huts in the Marshes with their walls of reed. I took my book out and read for a while. I knew the *Cosmologies* pretty well by heart, but just holding the book, letting my eyes follow the printed lines, was reassuring to me. I needed reassurance. I had no real idea what I was doing or where I was going, and now I'd taken on a charge who at best would slow me down very much. Maybe I could leave her in this town with somebody, I thought, and come back for her later. —Leave her? Come back from where? I looked over at her. She was sound asleep. I went out quietly to see about dinner.

I brought her back a bowl of chicken broth, and she roused up to drink it, but drank very little; she was feverish, I thought. I consulted with the innkeeper's wife, Ameno, who had the hearty, jolly manner of her trade, but underneath it seemed a quiet, serious woman. She came and looked at Melle and said she might have caught something or might just be very tired. She said, "Go on and have your supper. I'll keep the fire up, and look in at the child." She had persuaded Melle to let her have the little cat figure so she could put it on a necklace. Melle was watching her braid thread for the necklace, and dozing off again. I went to the common room and had an excellent supper of roast mutton, which made me think with affection and pain of Chamry Bern.

We stayed at the inn in Rami four nights. It didn't take Ameno long to let me know she knew Melle wasn't a boy, but she asked no questions—it was clear enough why a girl might want to travel as a boy—and dropped

no hints to anyone else. Melle wasn't sick, but she'd been pretty near giving out. Three days of rest and good food and kind care did wonders for her. She sat in bed and carefully sewed our gold pieces into our clothing, and then slept again. I would have stayed on still longer to build her up for travel if it hadn't been for what I heard the fourth night at the inn.

Men of the town came in every evening for a glass of beer or cider and to chat with one another and with any guests at the inn who wanted to be sociable. They were a bit cautious and stiff with me at first because I was supposed to be a scholar and a city man, but seeing that I wasn't much more than a boy and spoke little and modestly, they soon ignored me in a friendly fashion. They talked about local affairs, of course, but the travelers among them made conversation about the wider world too, which was interesting to me who had been for so long in the forest and the Marshes, hearing nothing of the City States and Bendile.

Melle was sleeping sound after a good supper, and I came to sit at the common-room fire. Conversation had fallen on the "Barnavites." Everybody had a story about Barna's men who used to raid the roads and farms and market towns. Some were the old romantic tales I'd heard in Etra, but one man here confirmed them. He said that three years ago, raiders had taken half the flock he was driving to market, but they'd truly taken half his flock, counting them out "one for you, one for us," when they could as well have taken them all, and so, he said, he could only curse them with half a curse. I had the impression that his hearers half believed him, too.

Then they all had tales about Barna's city, how the slaves kept houses full of beautiful women, how they had so much stolen gold there that they used it for roofing, and when the soldiers burned the city molten gold ran in streams in the gutters. Everybody knew about Barna, the giant with flaming red hair, taller than any other man, who'd planned to attack Asion, make himself king of Bendile, and put the slaves to rule their fallen masters. There was some discussion of the fact that you never could trust a slave no matter how loyal he seemed, and several examples of slavish treachery were given.

"Well, here's a tale for you," said one of the guests of the inn, a wool buyer from eastern Bendile. "About a disloyal slave and a loyal one too. I just heard this one. There was a slave boy from the Marshes who'd been

the pride of his masters in the city of Etra. He could tell any tale or sing any song, no matter what, he knew them all. He was worth a hundred gold pieces to his masters. He defiled a daughter of the house and ran away, stealing a bag of gold with him. They sent out slave takers after him, but none found him, and some said he'd drowned. But the son of the house had a loyal slave who swore he'd find the boy and bring him back to Etra to take his punishment for shaming the house of his masters. So he got on the track, and after a while he heard word of a young runaway in Barna's city who was famous for his speaking and singing. Barna himself, having been a learned slave, set a great value on this boy. But before the soldiers came, the boy gave Barna the slip too, and vanished again. The slave is still hunting for him. I talked to a man who knows him, he calls him 'Three Eyebrows.' He's been to the Marshes, and to Casicar, and Piram, and says he'll hunt the runaway down if it takes him the rest of his life. Now there's a slave loyal to his masters, I say!"

The others expressed modified approval. I tried to imitate their judicious nods, while the heart in me was cold as a lump of ice. My pose of being a scholar, which I hoped would save me from suspicion, now looked likely to bring it upon me. If only the man hadn't said the runaway was from the Marshes! My looks, the color of my skin, always drew some notice, anywhere outside the Marshes. And sure enough, a townsman eyed me over his beer and said, "You look to be from that side of the country. Do you know anything about this famous slave, then?"

I couldn't speak. I shook my head with as much indifference as I could pretend. More stories of escapes and slave takers followed. I sat through them, drank my cider, and told myself that I must not panic, that nobody had questioned my story, that having the child with me would avert suspicion. Tomorrow we'd set off again. It had been a mistake to stay anywhere for any length of time. But then, Melle could never have gone on if we hadn't rested here. It would be all right. We would come to the second river in only a few days, and cross it, and be free.

I spoke with Ameno that night, asking if she knew of any carters going north that might give us a lift. She told me where to go. Early in the morning I routed sleepy Melle out. Ameno sent us off with a packet of food and took the silver piece I offered her. "Luck be with you, go with Ennu," she said, and gave Melle a long, grave embrace. We went off

through the foggy dawn to a yard on the far edge of town where carters met to make up their loads and sometimes find passengers, and there we found a ride as far as a place called Tertudi, which the carter said was halfway to the river. I had no clear map of this part of Bendile in my mind, and had to rely on what people told me, knowing only that the river was north of us, and Mesun across it and well to the east.

It took our carter's slow horses all day to get to Tertudi, a small, poor town with no inn. I didn't want to stay there and be noticed. I hoped to break any connection with the inn at Rami, to leave no traceable path behind us. We spoke to no one in Tertudi, but simply walked away from it for a couple of miles into the hayfields that surrounded it, and made ourselves a camp by a little stream for the night. Crickets sang all about us in the warm evening, near and far. Melle ate with a good appetite and said she wasn't tired. She wanted me to tell her a story she knew. That was her request: "Tell me a story I know." I told her the beginning of the *Chamhan*. She listened, intent, never moving, till at last she began to blink and yawn. She fell asleep curled up in her poncho, holding the little cat figure at the base of her throat.

I lay listening to the crickets and looking out for the first stars. I slipped into sleep peacefully, but woke in the dark. There was a man in the hayfield, standing watching us. I knew him, I knew his face, the scar that split his eyebrow. I tried to get up but I was paralyzed as I had been paralyzed by Dorod's drugs, I could not move and my heart pounded and pounded . . . It was deep night, the stars blazing. Most of the crickets had fallen silent but one still trilled nearby. No one was there. But I could not sleep again.

It grieved me that blind hate and rancor should be my last link to Arcamand. I could think now of the people of that house with gratitude for what they had given me—kindness, security, learning, love. I could never think that Sotur or Yaven had or would have betrayed my love. I was able to see, in part at least, why the Mother and Father had betrayed my trust. The master lives in the same trap as the slave, and may find it even harder to see beyond it. But Torm and his slave-double Hoby never wanted to look beyond it; they valued nothing but power, the most brutal control of other people. My escape, if he heard of it, would have rankled Torm bitterly. As for Hoby, always seething with envious hatred, the knowledge

that I was going about as a free man would goad him to rageful, vengeful pursuit. I had no doubt that he was on my trail. And I was deeply afraid of him. By myself I was no match for him, and now I had my little, helpless hostage with me. She would awaken all his cruelty. I knew that cruelty.

I roused Melle well before dawn and we set off. All I knew to do was walk, walk on, get away.

We walked all day through rolling, open country; we passed a couple of villages at a distance, and avoided the few farms with their barking dogs. Mostly it was grazing land, cattle scattered out across the grasslands. We met up with a cowboy who waited for us and walked his horse along with us to talk. Melle was afraid of him, shrinking away from him, and I was none too glad of his company. But he had no curiosity about where we came from or where we were going. He was lonesome and wanted somebody to talk to. He got off his horse and rambled along with us, talking all the way about his horse and his cattle and his masters and whatever came into his head. Melle gradually seemed to feel easier. When he offered her a ride she shrank away again, but she was much attracted by the friendly little horse, and finally she let me put her up in the saddle.

Our new friend had told us he was out to round up some of his master's cattle which had strayed from the main herd, but he seemed to be in no great hurry about it, and went on with us for miles, Melle sitting in the saddle, looking increasingly blissful, while he led the horse. When I asked about the river, we talked at cross-purposes for quite a while, he insisting that it was to the east, not the north; finally he said, "Oh you're talking of the Sally River! I only know the name of it. It's a long, long way, it's the edge of the world! Our Ambare flows to it, I guess, but I don't know how far. You'll be walking a long time. Better get horses!"

"If we go east, we'll come to your river?"

"Yes, but it's a good long ways too." He gave us complicated directions involving drovers' paths and cart roads, and then ended up saying, "Of course if you just cut across those hills ahead of us you'll be at the Ambare in no time."

"Well, maybe we'll head that way," I said, and he said, "I might as well go that way too. Those cattle might be over there."

That made me suspicious of him. So fear taints the mind. I walked along wondering if he had been watching for us, if he was leading us to a trap,

and how to get rid of him, and at the same time certain that he was simply a lonely man happy to have company and pleased to please a child. As I grew silent he talked with Melle, who timidly asked him questions about the horse and its gear. Soon he was giving her a riding lesson, letting her hold the rein, telling her how to put Brownie into a trot. He was soft-voiced and easygoing with both the horse and the child. When he put out his hand to show her how to hold the rein, she pulled away from him in fear, and after that he never came very close to her, treating her with an innate tact. It was hard to distrust him. But I strode on weighed down with suspicion and worry. If it was so far to the Sensaly that this man thought it the end of the world, and if with Melle I could not walk more than ten miles a day, how long would it take us to get there? I felt that as we crept across these open plains we were exposed, visible to anybody looking for us.

Our companion's guidance so far was true: having crossed the low range of hills we saw a good-sized river a couple of miles farther on, flowing northeast. We stopped just over the crest of the hills and sat down under a stand of great beeches to share our food, while Brownie had a bait of oats from a nose bag. Melle called our companion Cowboy-dí, which made him grin; he called her Sonny. She sat beside me, but talked to him. They talked at great length about horses and cattle. I noticed that she kept asking him questions, as children will do, out of real curiosity no doubt, but also it meant she didn't have to answer any questions about herself or me. She was canny.

We could see a boat or barge now and then on the river, and our companion said, "There you are. Go on along to town and get yourselves onto a boat and that'll take you far as you want, eh?"

"Where's town?" Melle asked.

"On down along there," he said, waving vaguely at the river where it disappeared in a long bend among low hills. "I guess I better not go on with you. I don't think any of our cattle got any farther than this. But you go on down to town and get yourselves onto a boat and that'll take you as far as you want. Eh?"

I thought it strange that he said it again exactly the same way, as if he'd memorised it, as if he'd been taught how to lead us into a trap.

"That's a good idea," Melle said. "Isn't it, Avvi?"

“Could be,” I said.

She had a quite emotional parting from the horse, patting and petting it and embracing its long, mild head, and she and the cowboy said goodbye affectionately though without touching. She watched him ride off over the crest of the hills, and sighed as we started down. “They were beautiful,” she said.

I felt ashamed of myself, but still couldn’t relax from my wariness.

“Will we find the town and get on a boat?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

I found I couldn’t express my reasons. We must go on, we must escape the man who was following us, but no way of travel seemed safe to me.

“Or we could get horses, like he said. Only, are horses very expensive?”

“I think they are. And you have to know how to ride them.”

“I do now. Sort of.”

“I don’t,” I said shortly.

We walked on; it was easy going, downhill, and Melle flitted right along. At the bottom of the hill a dim footpath led off towards the river, and we followed that.

“So it would be better to get on a boat,” Melle said. “Wouldn’t it?”

I felt my sense of responsibility for her like a stone on my back, weighing me down. If it was just myself I’d run, I’d hide, I’d be gone, long gone. . . . I was angry with her for holding me back, slowing my steps, arguing with me about how to go. “I don’t know,” I said.

We went on, I always aware of shortening my pace to hers. We were now on a cart track, coming nearer the river, and saw the roofs of a small town ahead to the right, and soon the wharves, and boats tied up.

I’d asked the Lord Luck to give this child the blessing he’d given me. Was I to distrust him, too? Only a fool acts as if he knows better than Luck. I’d always been a fool, but not that kind.

“We’ll see when we get there,” I said, after a half mile of silence.

“We can pay for it. Can’t we?”

I nodded.

So when we came through apple orchards into town we went straight down to the riverfront and looked about. No boats were tied up and nobody was on the dock. There was a small inn just up the street, its door standing

open, and I looked in. A dwarf, a man no taller than Melle, with a big head and a handsome, scowling face, looked round the bar. “What’ll you have, Marshy?” he said.

I all but turned and ran.

“What’s that with you? A pup? No, by Sampa, a kid. Both of you kids. What d’you want then, milk?”

“Yes,” I said, and Melle said, “Yes, please.”

He fetched two cups of milk and we sat at a small table to drink it. He stood by the bar and looked us over. His gaze made me very uneasy, but Melle didn’t seem to mind it, and gazed right back at him without her usual shyness.

“Is there a black cat?” she asked.

“Why would there be?”

“It said on the sign over the door. The picture.”

“Ah. No. That’s the house. Sign of the Black Cat. Blessing of Ennu, it is. Where are you bound, then? On your own, are you?”

“Downriver,” I said.

“You’re off a boat, then.” He looked out the open door to see if any boat had docked.

“No. Walking. Thought we might go by water if there’s a boat would take us.”

“Nothing in now. Pedri’s barge will be in tomorrow.”

“Going downstream?”

“Clear to the Sally,” the man said; so it seemed they called the Sensaly in this country.

He refilled Melle’s cup, then stumped to the bar and came back with two full mugs of cider. He set one down in front of me and raised the other in salute.

I drank with him. Melle raised her cup of milk too.

“Stay tonight if you like,” he said. Melle looked at me bright-eyed. It was coming on to evening. I did my best to forget my fears and take what Luck gave us. I nodded.

“Anything to pay with?” he asked.

I took a couple of bronzes from my pocket.

“Because if you hadn’t, I’d eat the kid, see,” the dwarf said in a matter-of-fact tone, and lunged with a hideous, gaping, threatening face at Melle.

She shrank back against me with a great gasp, but then she laughed—sooner than I could smile at his joke. He drew back, grinning. “I was scared,” she said to him. He looked pleased. I could feel her heart beating, shaking her small body.

“Put it away,” he said to me. “We’ll settle up when you go.”

He sent us upstairs to a little room at the front of the house; it looked out through low windows over the river and was clean enough, though full of beds, five of them crammed in it side by side. He cooked us a good supper, which we ate along with a couple of longshoremen who ate there every night. They didn’t talk, and the host said little. Melle and I walked along the wharves for a while after supper to see the evening light on the water, and then went up to bed. At first I couldn’t get to sleep, my mind racing and racing among fruitless thoughts and fears. At last I dropped into sleep, but never very deeply—and then I sat up, blindly reaching for my knife, which I’d set on the floor beside my cot. Steps on the staircase, stopping and starting. The door creaked.

A man came into the room. I could just make out his bulk in the faint starlight from the windows. I sat still, holding my breath and my knife.

The big dark shape blundered past my bed, felt its way over to the end bed, and sat down. I heard shoes thump on the floor. The man lay down, thrashed about a bit, muttered a curse, and lay still. Pretty soon he began to snore. I thought it was a ruse. He wanted us to think he was asleep. But he kept it up, deep and long, till daybreak.

When Melle woke and found a strange man in the room she was very frightened. She could not wait to get out.

Our host gave her warm milk for breakfast, and me warm cider, along with good bread and fresh peaches. I was too restless and uneasy to want to wait for the barge. I told him we’d be going on foot. He said, “If you want to walk, walk, but if you want to float, she’ll be along in an hour or two.” And Melle nodded; so I obeyed.

The barge came into the wharf in the middle of the morning, a long, heavy craft with a kind of house amidships that made me think of Ammeda’s boat in the Marshes; the decks were piled with crates, hay bales, several cages of chickens, all kinds of goods and parcels. While unloading and loading went on I asked the master if we could take passage, and we settled soon enough on a silver piece for fare all the way

to the Sensaly, sleeping on deck. I went back to the Black Cat to settle our bill there. “A bronze,” the dwarf said.

“Two beds, food and drink,” I protested, putting down four bronzes.

He pushed two back to me. “I don’t often get a guest my own size,” he said, unsmiling.

So we left that town, went aboard Pedri’s barge, and set off down the river Ambare at about noon. The sun was bright, the bustle of the docks cheerful, and Melle was excited to be onboard a ship, though she kept at a distance from the master and his assistant, and always very close to me. I felt relieved to be on the water. I said in my mind the prayer to the Lord of the Springs and Rivers I’d learned from my uncle in Ferusi. I stood with Melle watching the longshoreman free the rope and the master haul it in while the gap of roiling water slowly widened between the boat and the dock. Just as the barge began to turn to take the current, a man came down the street and out onto the docks. It was Hoby.

We were in plain sight standing against the wall of the boathouse. I dropped down to sit on the deck, hiding my face in my arms. “What’s wrong?” Melle asked, squatting down beside me.

I dared a glance over my forearm. Hoby stood on the dock looking after the barge. I could not tell if he had seen me.

“Beaky, what’s wrong?” the child whispered.

I finally answered, “Bad luck.”

Chapter 15

THE TOWN passed out of view behind us around the bend of the river. We drifted easily downstream in the hot sunlight. As we stood at the rail of the barge I told Melle that I'd seen a man I knew, who might know me.

"From Barna's house?" she asked, still whispering.

I shook my head. "From longer ago. When I was a slave in the city."

"Is he bad?" she asked, and I said, "Yes."

I didn't think he'd seen me, but that was small reassurance; he had only to ask people on the dock, or the host of the Black Cat, if they'd seen a young man, dark skin, big nose, looks like a Marshman.

"Don't worry about it," I said. "We're on the boat, he's on foot."

But that wasn't very reassuring, either. The barge went at the pace of the river, steered with a long sweep and rudder at the stern. It put into every town and village on the riverbank, taking on and putting off cargo and passengers. On its upriver journey it would be pulled by horses on the towpath by the river and would go even slower, the master told me. That was hard to believe. The Ambare, taking its course through great level plains, didn't exactly run; it wandered and meandered, it moseyed along, in places it oozed. Drovers used the towpath to move their cattle; sometimes we'd slowly come up to a herd of brown and brindle cows clopping along at a cow's pace, headed downstream like us, and it would take us a long, long time to draw ahead of them.

The days on the water were sweet and dull and calm, but every time we drew into the wharf of a village my fear rose up again and I scanned every face on shore. Over and over I debated with myself whether it would be wiser to debark at some town on the eastern bank and make our way afoot to the Sensaly, avoiding all towns and villages. But though Melle was by now in much better shape than she'd been when I found her, she still couldn't walk far or fast. It seemed best to float, at least until we were

within a day's journey of the Sensaly. The end of the barge journey, at the rivermeet, was a town called Bemette, and that town I resolved at all costs to avoid. There was a ferry across the Sensaly there, the barge master told me. A ferry was what we needed, but that's where Hoby would be waiting for us. I only hoped he would not be waiting for us sooner than that. On horseback or by wagon or even walking hard, he could certainly outpace the barge and arrive before we did at any of the villages on the western bank.

Pedri the barge master paid us little heed and didn't want his assistant to waste time talking to us. We were cargo, along with the boxes and bales and chickens and also, between village and village, the goats and grandmothers, and once a young colt who tried, the whole time he was on the barge, to commit suicide by drowning. Pedri and his assistant slept in the houseboat, taking watch and watch while the barge was afloat. We made our own meals, buying food at villages where we stopped. Melle made friends with the chickens, who were being sent all the way to Bemette; they were some kind of prize breeding stock with fancy tails and feathered legs, all hens. They were perfectly tame, and I bought Melle a bag of birdseed to entertain them with. She named them all, and would sit with them for hours. Sitting with her, I found their mild, continual conversation soothing. Only when a hawk circled up in the sky over the river, all the busy little cluckings and talkings stopped, and they huddled under their perches, hiding in their ruffled feathers, silent. "Don't worry, Reddy," Melle would soothe them. "It's all right, Little Pet. Don't worry, Snappy. It can't get you. I won't let it."

Don't worry, Beaky.

I read in my book. I said old poems to Melle, and she learned to recite *The Bridge on the Nisas*. We went on with the *Chamhan*.

"I wish I was really your brother, Gav," she murmured to me one night on the dark river under the stars. I murmured back, "You really are my sister."

We put ashore at a wharf on the eastern bank. Pedri and his hand were busy at once unloading hay bales. There was no town as such, but a kind of warehouse-barn and a couple of old cowboys guarding it. "How far is it to Bemette from here?" I asked one of them, and he said, "Two, three hours on a good horse."

I went back aboard and told Melle to gather up her things. My pack was always ready, filled with all the food I could carry. I'd paid the fare before we started. We slipped ashore, and as I passed Pedri I said, "We'll walk from here, our farm's just back that way," pointing southeast. He grunted and went on shifting bales. We walked away from the Ambare the way I'd pointed till we were out of sight, then turned left to bear northeast, towards the Sensaly. The country was very flat, mostly tall grass, with a few groves of trees. Melle walked along beside me stoutly. As she walked she muttered a soft litany, "Goodbye Snappy, goodbye Rosy, goodbye Goldeye, goodbye Little Pet . . ."

We walked on no path. The country did not change and there were no landmarks, except, very far off northward, a blue line that might be clouds or might be hills across the river. I had nothing but the sun to tell me the direction to go. It came on to evening. We stopped at a grove of trees to eat supper, then rolled up in our blankets and slept there. We had seen no sign of anyone following us, but I was certain that Hoby was on our track, that he might even be waiting for us. The dread of seeing him never left me, and filled my restless sleep. I was awake long before dawn. We set off in the twilight of morning, still heading, as well as I could steer us, northeast. The sun came up red and huge over the plains.

The ground began to get boggy, and there were low places of marsh and reed. About midday we saw the Sensaly.

It was wide—a big river. Not deep, I thought, for there were shoals and gravel bars out in midstream, and more than one channel; but from the shore you can't tell where the current quickens and has dug deep places in such a stream.

"We'll go east along the river," I said to Melle and to myself. "We'll come to a ford. Or a ferry. Mesun is still a long way upriver from here, so we're going the right direction for sure, and when we can get across, we will."

"All right," Melle said. "What's the river's name?"

"Sensaly."

"I'm glad rivers have names. Like people." She made a song of the name and I heard the thin little chant as we walked, *Sen-sally, sen-sallee* . . . Going was hard in the willow thickets above the shore, and so

we soon went down to walk on the river beach, wide floodplains of mud, gravel, and sand.

We could be seen more easily there; but if he was on our track there was no way to hide. This was an open, desolate country. There were no signs of humankind. We saw only deer and a few wild cattle.

When we stopped for Melle to rest I tried fishing, but had little luck, a few small perch. The river was very clear, and as far as I waded out in it, the current was not strong. I saw a couple of places I thought might be fordable, but there were tricky-looking bits on the far side; we went on.

We walked so for three days. We had food for about two more and after that must live by fishing. It was evening, and Melle was tired. I was too. The sense of being pursued wore me down, and I had little sleep, waking again and again all night. I left her sitting on a sandy bit under a willow and went up the rise of the bank, scouting as always for a ford. I saw faint tracks coming down across the beach, ahead of us; indeed there looked to be a ford there in the wide, shoal-broken river.

I looked back, and saw a single horseman coming along beside the water.

I ran down to Melle and said, “Come,” picking up my pack. She was frightened and bewildered, but took up her little blanket pack at once. I caught her hand and brought her along as fast as she could go to the track I had seen. Horses and wagons had crossed the river here. I led Melle into the water, saying to her, “When it gets deep I’ll carry you.”

The way to go was plain at first, the clear water showing me the shallows between shoals. Out in the middle of the water I looked back once. The horseman had seen us. He was just riding into the river, the water splashing up about his horse’s legs. It was Hoby. I saw his face, round, hard, and heavy, Torm’s face, the Father’s, the face of the slave owner and the slave. He was scowling, urging on his horse, shouting at me, words I could not hear.

I saw all that in a glance and waded on, crosscurrent, pulling the child with me as best I could. When I saw she was getting out of her depth I said, “Climb up on my shoulders, Melle. Don’t hold me by the throat, but hold tight.” She obeyed.

I knew where I was then. I had been in this river with this burden on my shoulders. I did not look around because I do not look around, I go

forward, almost out of my depth, but still touching bottom, and there is the place that looks like the right way to go, straight up to the shore, but I don't go that way, the sand gives way beneath my foot. I must go to the right, and farther still to the right. Then the current seizes me with sudden terrific power and I'm off my feet, trying to swim, and sinking, floundering, sinking—but I have foothold again, the child clinging to me hard, I can climb against that terrible current, fight my way up into the shallows, scramble gasping up among the willows whose roots are in the river, and from there, only from there, I can look back.

The horse was struggling out in the deep current, riderless.

I could see how all the force of the river gathered in that channel, just downstream from where we had found our way.

Melle slipped down from my back and pressed up tight against me, shuddering. I held her close, but I could not move. I crouched staring at the river, at the horse being carried far down the river, swimming desperately. Now it began to find footing. I watched it make its way, plunging and slipping, back to the other shore. I scanned the water, the islets, the gravel bars, upriver and down, again and again. Sand, gravel, shining water.

"Gav, Gav, Beaky," the child was sobbing, "come on. Come on. We have to go on. We have to get away." She tugged at my legs.

"I think maybe we have," I tried to say, but I had no voice. I staggered after Melle for a few steps up into the willow grove, out of the water, onto dry land. There my legs gave way and I pitched down. I tried to tell Melle that I was all right, that it was all right, but I couldn't speak. I couldn't get air enough. I was in the water again, under the water. The water was clear and bright all round me, then clear and dark.

♦

WHEN I CAME to myself it was night, mild and overcast. The river ran black among its pale shoals and bars. The little damp hot bundle pressed against my side was Melle. I roused her, and we groped and crawled up through the thickets to a kind of hollow that seemed to offer shelter. I was too clumsy to make a fire. Everything in our packs was damp, but we took

off our wet clothes, rubbed ourselves hard, and rolled up in our damp blankets. We huddled together again and fell asleep at once.

My fear was gone. I had crossed the second river. I slept long and deep.

We woke to sunlight. We spread out all our damp things to dry and ate damp stale bread there in the hollow among the willow thickets. Melle seemed to have taken no harm, but was silent and watchful. She said at last, “Don’t we have to run away any more?”

“I don’t think so,” I said. Before we ate, I had gone down to the shore and, concealed in the thickets, scanned the river and the shores for a long time. Reason told me I should fear, reason said that Hoby might well have swum across and be hiding near; but all the time unreason told me, You’re safe; he’s gone; the link is broken.

Melle was watching me, with a child’s trust.

“We’re in Urdile now,” I said, “where there are no slaves. And no slave takers. And . . .” But I didn’t know whether she’d even seen Hoby behind us in the river, and didn’t know how to speak of him. “And I think we’re free,” I said.

She pondered this for a while.

“Can I call you Gav again?”

“My whole name is Gavir Aytana Sidoy,” I said. “But I like Beaky.”

“Beaky and Squeaky,” Melle murmured, looking down, with her small, half-circle smile. “Can I go on being Miv?”

“It might be a good idea. If you want to.”

“Now are we going to see the great man in the city?”

“Yes,” I said. And so when our things had dried out we set off.

Our journey to Mesun was easy enough, as indeed all our journey had been, but wonderfully freed from the dread that had dogged and darkened my way between the rivers. I had no idea what I was going to do when I got to Mesun, how we were to live; but to ask too many questions seemed ungrateful to Lord Luck and Lady Ennu. They’d been with us so far, they wouldn’t leave us now. I sang Caspro’s hymn to them under my breath as we walked.

“You don’t sing quite as well as some people,” my companion remarked, with some diplomacy.

“I know I don’t. You sing, then.”

She lifted up a sweet, unsteady little voice in a love song she'd heard in Barna's house. I thought of her beautiful sister, and wondered if Melle too would be beautiful. I found myself thinking, "Let her be spared that!" But surely that was a slave's thought. I must learn to think with a free mind.

Urdile was a pleasant country of apple orchards and poplar-bordered roads, rising up slowly from the river to the blue hills I'd seen from far away. We walked, and sometimes got a lift on a cart, and bought food at village markets, or were offered milk by a farm woman who saw us pass and pitied the dusty child. I got scolded for dragging my little brother out to tramp the roads, but when my little brother clung to me and glared loyal defiance, the scolder would melt and offer us food or a hayloft to sleep in. So after five days, returning towards the river, which had curved away from our road, we came to the city of Mesun.

Built on steep hills right above the river, with roofs of slate and red tile, and towers, and several ornate bridges, Mesun was a city of stone, but it was not walled. That seemed strange to me. There were no gates, no guard towers, no guards. I saw no soldiers anywhere. We walked into a great city as into a village.

The houses towered up three and four stories over streets full of people, carts, wagons, horses. The din and commotion and crowding seemed tremendous to us. Melle was holding my hand tightly, and I was glad of it. We passed a marketplace near the river that made Etra's market seem a very small affair. I thought the best thing to do was find some modest inn where we could put down our packs and clean ourselves up a bit, for we were a frowzy, filthy pair by now. As we went on past the market, looking for inn signs, I saw two young men come swinging down a steep street, wearing long, light, grey-brown cloaks and velvet caps that squashed out over the ears. They were exactly like a picture in a book in Everra's library: *Two Scholars of the University of Mesun.* They saw me staring at them, and one of them gave me a slight wink. I stepped forward and said, "Excuse me, would you tell us how to get to the University?"

"Right up the hill, friend," the one who'd winked said. He looked at us curiously. I didn't know what to ask him. I finally said, "Are there lodging houses up there?" and he nodded: "The Quail's the cheapest." His friend said, "No, the Barking Dog," and the first one said, "All depends on your

taste in insects: fleas at the Quail, bugs at the Dog.” And they went on down the street laughing.

We climbed up the way they had come down. Before long the cobblestone way became steps. I saw that we were climbing around a great wall of stones. Mesun had been a fortified city, long ago, and this was the wall of the citadel. Over the wall loomed palaces of silver-grey stone with steep-pitched roofs and tall windows. The steps brought us up at last onto a little curving street lined with smaller houses, and Melle whispered, “There they are.” They stood side by side, two inns, with their signs of the quail and the savagely barking dog. “Fleas or bedbugs?” I asked Melle, and she said, “Fleas.” So we took lodgings at the Quail.

We had a most welcome bath and gave what spare clothing we had to the sour-faced landlady to be cleaned. We were on the watch for fleas, but there seemed to be less than in most haylofts. After a scanty and not very good dinner, Melle was ready to go to bed. She had borne the journey well, but every day of it had taken her to about the limit of her small strength. The last couple of days she had had spells of tears and snappishness, like any tired child. I was pretty stretched myself, but I felt a nervous energy in me, here in the city, that would not let me rest. I asked Melle if she’d be worried if I went out for a while. She was lying holding her Ennu figure against her chest, her beloved poncho pulled up over the bedcover. “No,” she said, “I won’t worry, Beaky.” But she looked a little sad and tremulous.

I said, “Oh, maybe I won’t go.”

“Go *on*,” she said crossly. “Go *away*! I am just going to sleep!” And she shut her eyes, frowning, her mouth pulled tight.

“All right. I’ll be back before dark.”

She ignored me, squeezing her eyes shut. I went out.

As I came out into the street the same two young men were coming by, a bit out of breath from the climb up, and the one who’d winked saw me. “Chose the fleas, eh?” he said. He had a pleasant smile and was openly curious about me. I took this second meeting as an omen or sign which I should follow. I said, “You’re students of the University?”

He stopped and nodded; his companion stopped less willingly.

“I’d like to know how to become a student.”

“I thought that might be the case.”

“Can you tell me—at all—how I should— Whom I should ask—”

“Nobody sent you here? A teacher, a scholar you worked with?”

My heart sank. “No,” I said.

He cocked his head with its ridiculous but dashing velvet cap. “Come on to the Gross Tun and have a drink with us,” he said. “I’m Sampater Yille, this is Gola Mederra. He’s law, I’m letters.”

I said my name, and, “I was a slave in Etra.”

I had to say that before anything else, before they were shamed by finding they had offered their friendship to a slave.

“In Etra? Were you there in the siege?” said Sampater, and Gola said, “Come on, I’m thirsty!”

We drank beer at the Gross Tun, a crowded beer hall noisy with students, most of them about my age or a little older. Sampater and Gola were principally interested in putting away as much beer as possible as fast as possible and in talking to everybody else at the beer hall, but they introduced me to everyone, and everyone gave me advice about where to go and whom to see about taking classes in letters at the University. When it turned out I knew not one of the famous teachers they mentioned, Sampater asked, “There was nobody you came here wanting to study with, then, a name you knew?”

“Orrec Caspro.”

“Ha!” He stared at me, laughed, and raised his mug. “You’re a poet, then!”

“No, no. I only—” I didn’t know what I was. I didn’t know enough to know what I was, or wanted to do or be. I’d never felt so ignorant.

Sampater drained his mug and cried, “One more round, on me, and I’ll take you to his house.”

“No, I can’t—”

“Why not? He’s not a professor, you know, he keeps no state. You don’t have to approach him on your knees. We’ll go right there, it’s no distance.”

I managed to get out of it by insisting that I must be going back to my little brother. I paid for our beer, which endeared me to them both, and Sampater told me how to get to Caspro’s house, just up another street or two and around the corner. “Go see him, go see him tomorrow,” he said. “Or, listen, I’ll come by for you.” I assured him I’d go, and would use his name as a password, and so I got away from the Gross Tun and back to the Quail, with my head spinning.

Waking early, lying thinking as the daylight grew in the low room, I made up my mind. My vague plans of becoming a student at the University had dissolved. I didn't have enough money, I didn't have enough training, and I didn't think I could become one of those lighthearted fellows at the Gross Tun. They were my age, but we'd reached our age by different roads.

What I wanted was work, to support myself and Melle. In a city this size, without slaves, there must be work to do. I knew the name of only one person in Mesun: so, to him I would go. If he couldn't give me work, I'd find it elsewhere.

When Melle woke I told her we were going to buy some fine new city clothes. She liked that idea. The sour landlady told us how to get to the cloth market at the foot of the hill of the citadel, and there we found booths and booths of used clothing, where we could get decked out decently or even somewhat grandly.

I saw Melle looking with a kind of wistful awe at a robe of worn but beautiful patterned ivory silk. I said, "Squeaky, you don't have to keep being Miv, you know."

She hunched up with shyness. "It's too big," she murmured. In fact it was a robe for a grown woman. When we had admired it and left it behind she said to me, "It looked like Diero." She was right.

We both ended up with the trousers, linen shirt, and dark vest or tunic that men and boys in Mesun wore. For Melle I found an elegant small velvet vest with buttons made of copper pennies. She kept looking down at her buttons as we climbed back up to the citadel. "Now I will never not have some money," she said.

We ate bread with oil and olives at a street vendor's stall, and then I said, "Now we'll go and see the great man." Melle was delighted. She flitted up the steep stone street ahead of me. As for me, I walked in a kind of dogged, blind, frightened resolution. I had stopped back by the inn for the small packet wrapped in reedcloth which I now carried.

Sampater's directions had been good; we found what had to be the house, a tall, narrow one set right against the rock of the hill, the last house on the street. I knocked.

A young woman opened the door. Her skin was so pale her face seemed luminous. Melle and I both stared at her hair—I had never seen such hair

in my life. It was like the finest gold wire, it was like a sheep's fleece combed out, a glory of light about her head. "Oh!" Melle said, and I almost did too.

The young woman smiled a little. I imagine that we were rather funny, big boy and little boy, very clean, very stiff, standing staring round-eyed on the threshold. Her smile was kind, and it heartened me.

"I came to Mesun to see Orrec Caspro, if—if that is possible," I said.

"I think it's possible," she said. "May I tell him who . . ."

"My name is Gavir Aytana Sidoy. This is my—brother—Miv—"

"I'm Melle," Melle said. "I'm a girl." She hunched up her shoulders and looked down, frowning fiercely, like a small falcon.

"Please come in," the young woman said. "I'm Memer Galva. I'll go ask if Orrec is free—" And she was off, quick and light, carrying her marvelous hair like a candle flame, a halo of sunlight.

We stood in a narrow entrance hall. There were several doorways to rooms on either side.

Melle put her hand in mine. "Is it all right if I'm not Miv?" she whispered.

"Of course. I'm glad you're not Miv."

She nodded. Then she said again, louder, "Oh!"

I looked where she was looking, a little farther down the hall. A lion was crossing the hall.

It paid no attention to us at all, but stood in a doorway lashing its tail and looked back impatiently over its shoulder. It was not a black marsh lion; it was the color of sand, and not very large. I said with no voice, "Ennu!"

"I'm coming," a woman said, and she appeared, crossing the hallway, following the lion.

She saw us and stopped. "Oh dear," she said. "Please don't be afraid. She's quite tame. I didn't know anybody was here. Won't you come on in to the hearth room?"

The lion turned around and sat down, still looking impatient. The woman put her hand on its head and said something to it, and it said, "Aoww," in a complaining way.

I looked at Melle. She stood rigid, staring at the lion, whether with terror or fascination I couldn't tell. The woman spoke to Melle: "Her name

is Shetar, and she's been with us ever since she was a kitten. Would you like to pet her? She likes being petted." The woman's voice was extraordinarily pleasant, low-pitched, almost hoarse, but with a lulling in it. And she spoke with the Uplands accent, like Chamry Bern.

Melle clutched my hand more strongly and nodded.

I came forward with her, tentatively. The woman smiled at us and said, "I'm Gry."

"This is Melle. I'm Gavir."

"Melle! That is a lovely name. Shetar, please greet Melle properly."

The lion got up quite promptly, and facing us, made a deep bow—that is, she stretched out her forelegs the way cats do, with her chin on her paws. Then she stood up and looked meaningfully at Gry who took something out of her pocket and popped it in the lion's mouth. "Good lion," she said.

Very soon Melle was petting the lion's broad head and neck. Gry talked with her in an easy, reassuring way, answering her questions about Shetar. A halflion, she said it was. Half was quite enough, I thought.

Looking up at me, Gry asked, "Did you come to see Orrec?"

"Yes. The—the lady said to wait."

And just then Memer Galva came back into the hall. "He says to come up to his study," she said. "I'll show you up if you like."

Gry said, "Maybe Melle would like to stay with Shetar and us for a while."

"Oh yes please," Melle said, and looked at me to see if it was all right.

"Yes please," I echoed. My heart was beating so hard I couldn't think. I followed the pale flame of Memer's hair up a narrow staircase and into a hall.

As she opened the door I knew where I was. I know it, I remember it. I have been here many times, the dark room, the book-littered table under a tall window, the lamp. I know the face that turns to me, alert, sorrowful, unguarded, I know his voice as he speaks my name—

I could not say anything. I stood like a block of stone. He gazed at me intently. "What is it?" he asked, low-voiced.

I managed to say I was sorry, and he got me to sit down, and clearing some books off another chair, sat down facing me. "So?"

I was clutching the packet. I unwrapped it, fumbling at the tightly sealed reedcloth, and held his book out to him. “When I was a slave I was forbidden to read your work. But I was given this book by a fellow slave. When I lost everything, I lost it, but again it was given me. It came with me across the river of death and the river of life. It was the sign to me of where my treasure is. It was my guide. So I— So I followed it to its maker. And seeing you, I knew I have seen you all my life—that I was to come here.”

He took the little book and looked at its battered, water-swollen binding, turning it in his hands. He opened it gently. From the page it opened to, he read, “ ‘Three things that, seeking increase, strengthen soul: love, learning, liberty.’ ” He gave a sigh. “I wasn’t much older than you when I wrote that,” he said, a little wryly. He looked up at me. He gave me back the book, saying, “You honor me, Gavir Aytana. You give me the gift only the reader can give the writer. Is there anything I can give you?”

He too spoke like Chamry Bern.

I sat dumb. My burst of eloquence was over, my tongue was tied.

“Well, we can talk about that presently,” he said. He was concerned and gentle. “Tell me something about yourself. Where were you in slavery? Not in my part of the world, I know. Slaves in the Uplands have no more book learning than their masters do.”

“In the House of Arca, in the city of Etra,” I said. Tears sprang into my eyes as I said it.

“But your people came from the Marshes, I think?”

“My sister and I were taken by slavers . . .” And so he drew my story from me, a brief telling of it, but he kept me at it, asking questions and not letting me rush ahead. I said little about how Sallo died, for I could not burden a stranger with my heart’s grief. When I got to my return to the forest, and how Melle and I met there, his eyes flashed. “Melle was my mother’s name,” he said. “And my daughter’s.” His voice dropped, saying that. He looked away. “And you have this child with you—so Memer said?”

“I couldn’t leave her there,” I said, feeling that her presence required apology.

“Some could.”

“She’s very gifted—I never had so quick a pupil. I hope that here . . .” But I stopped. What did I hope, for Melle or myself?

“Here certainly she can be given what she needs,” Orrec Caspro said promptly and firmly. “How did you travel with a young child all the way from the Daneran Forest to Mesun? That can’t have been easy.”

“It was easy enough till I learned my . . . my enemies in Arcamand were still hunting for me, on my track.” But I had not named Torm and Hoby till then. I had to go back and say who they were, and to tell that my sister’s death had been at their hands.

When I told him of how Hoby had hunted me and followed us, and of crossing the Sensaly, he listened the way the fellows in Brigin’s camp listened to *The Siege and Fall of Sentas*, holding his breath.

“You saw him drown?” he asked.

I shook my head. “I saw the horse with no rider. Nothing else. The river’s wide, and I couldn’t see along the near shore. He may have drowned. He may not. But I think . . .” I didn’t know how to say it. “It’s as if a chain has broken.”

Caspro sat brooding over my story a while. “I want Memer and Gry to hear this. I want to hear more about what you call the remembering—your visions— Seeing me!” He looked up and laughed, gazing at me with amused and wondering sympathy. “And I want to meet your companion. Shall we go down?”

There was a garden beside the house, a narrow one, wedged between house walls and the cliff that towered up behind. It was bright with late morning sun and late summer flowers. For an instant I remembered the flowers. There was a very small fountain, which dribbled rather than ran. On the flagstones and marble benches around it the two women, the girl, and the lion sat talking—that is, the lion had gone to sleep, while Melle stroked her dreamily, and the women were talking.

“You met my wife, Gry Barre,” Caspro said to me as we came into the garden. “She and I are Uplanders. Memer Galva came with us from her home, the city of Ansul; she’s our guest this year. I teach her the modern poets, and she teaches me Aritan, the ancient tongue of our people. Now introduce me to your companion, if you will.”

But as we approached, Melle scrambled up and hid her face against me, clinging to me. It was unlike her, and I didn’t know what to do. “Melle,” I

said, “this is our host—the great man we came to see.”

She clung to my legs and would not look.

“Never mind,” Caspro said. His face was grim for a moment. Then, not looking at Melle or coming close to her, he said pleasantly, “Gry, Memer, we must keep our guests a while so you can hear their story.”

“Melle told us about the chickens on the boat,” Memer said. The sunlight on her hair was marvelous, radiant. I couldn’t look at her and couldn’t look away from her. Caspro sat down on the bench beside Memer, so I sat down on another bench and got Melle to stand beside my legs, in the circle of my arms, thus defending both her and myself.

“I think it’s time for a bite to eat,” Gry said. “Melle, come with me and give me a hand, will you? We’ll be back in a moment.” Melle let herself be led away, still turning her face away from Caspro as she went.

I apologised for her behavior. Caspro said simply, “How could she do otherwise?” And as I thought back on our journey I realised that the only men Melle had spoken to or even looked at were the dwarf innkeeper, whom she may have thought a strange kind of child, and the cowboy, who had slowly earned her trust. She had kept clear away, always, from the bargemen, and any other men. I had not seen it. It wrung my heart.

“You’re from the Marshlands?” Memer asked me. All these people had beautiful voices; hers was like running water.

“I was born there,” was all I could get out in reply.

“And stolen by slavers, when he was a baby, with his sister,” Caspro said, “and taken to Etra. And they brought you up there to be an educated man, did they? Who was your teacher?”

“A slave. Everra was his name.”

“What did you have by way of books? I don’t think of the City States as homes of learning—although in Pagadi there are certainly some fine scholars, and fine poets too. But one thinks of soldiers more than scholars there.”

“All the books Everra had were old,” I said. “He wouldn’t let us read the moderns—what he called the moderns—”

“Like me,” Caspro said with his brief, broad smile. “I know, I know. Nema, and the Epics, and Trudec’s *Moralities* . . . That’s what they started me on in Derris Water! So, you were educated so that you could teach the

children of the household. Well, that much is good. Though to keep a teacher as a slave . . .”

“It wasn’t an evil slavery,” I said. “Until—” I stopped.

Memer said, “Can slavery not be evil?”

“If your masters aren’t cruel people—and if you don’t know there’s anything else,” I said. “If everybody believes it’s the way things are and must be, then you can not know that . . . that it’s wrong.”

“Can you not know?” she said, not accusing or arguing, simply asking, and thinking as she asked. She looked at me directly and said, “I was a slave in Ansul. All my people were. But by recent conquest, not by caste. We didn’t have to believe we were slaves by the order of nature. That must be very different.”

I wanted to talk to her but I couldn’t. “It was a slave,” I said to Caspro, “who taught me your hymn to Liberty.”

Memer’s smile brightened her grave, quiet face for a moment. Though her complexion was so light, she had dark eyes that flashed like the fire in opal. “We sang that song in Ansul when we drove the Alds out,” she said.

“It’s the tune,” Caspro said. “Good tune. Catchy.” He stretched, enjoying the warmth of the sun, and said, “I want to hear more about Barna and his city. It sounds as if there was a bitter tragedy there. Whatever you can tell me. But you said you became his bard, as it were, his reciter. So then, you have a good memory?”

“Very good,” I said. “That’s my power.”

“Ah!” I had spoken with confidence, and he responded to it. “You memorise without difficulty?”

“Without trying,” I said. “It’s part of the reason I came here. What’s the good of having a head full of everything you ever read? People liked hearing the stories, there in the forest. But what could I do with them in the Marshes? Or anywhere else? I thought maybe at the University . . .”

“Yes, yes, absolutely,” Caspro said. “Or perhaps . . . Well, we’ll see. Here come *mederende fereho en refema*—is that right, Memer?— In Aritan it means ‘beautiful women bringing food.’ You’ll want to learn Aritan, Gavir. Think of it, another language—a language different from ours!—not entirely of course, it’s the ancestor of ours, but quite different—and a whole new poetry!” As he spoke, with the unguarded passion that I already saw characterised him, he was careful not to look at Melle, only

at his wife, and not to come near Melle as he helped set out the food on an unoccupied bench. They had brought bread and cheese, olives, fruit, and a thin, light cider to drink.

"Where are you staying?" Gry asked, and when I said, "The Quail," she said, "How are the fleas?"

"Not too bad. Are they, Melle?"

She had come to stand close to me again. She shook her head, and scratched her shoulder.

"Shetar has her own private fleas," Gry told her. "Lion fleas. She won't share them with us. And the Quail fleas won't bite her." Shetar had opened an eye, found the food uninteresting, and gone back to sleep.

Having eaten a little, Melle sat down on the paving stones in front of me but close to the lion, within petting distance. She and Gry kept up a murmured conversation, while Caspro talked with me and Memer put in a word now and then. What he was doing, in a mild and roundabout fashion, was finding out how much of a scholar I was, what I knew and didn't know. From the little Memer said, I thought she must know everything there was to know in the way of poetry and tales. But when we came to history she declared ignorance, saying she knew only that of Ansul, and not much of that, because all the books in Ansul had been destroyed by the conquerors of the city. I wanted to hear that hideous story, but Caspro, mildly perseverant, kept on the course of his questions until he'd learned what he wanted to know, and even won from me a confession of my old, foolish ambition to write a history of the City States. "I don't think I'll ever do that," I said, trying to make light of it, "since it would involve going back there."

"Why not?" said Caspro, frowning.

"I'm a runaway slave."

"A citizen of Urdile is free," he said, still frowning. "No one can declare him a slave, no matter where he goes."

"But I'm not a citizen of Urdile."

"If you'll go to the Commons House with me to vouch for you, you can become one tomorrow. There are plenty of ex-slaves here, who freely come and go to Asion and the City States as citizens of Urdile. But as for history, you might find better documents in the library of the University here than in the City States."

“They don’t know what to do with them,” I said sadly, thinking of the wonderful records and annals I had handled at the Shrine of the Forefathers.

“Perhaps you can show them what to do with them—given time,” Caspro said. “The first thing for you to do is become a citizen. Next, enroll in the University.”

“Caspro-dí, I haven’t much money. I think the first thing for me to do is find work.”

“Well, I have an idea about that, if Gry agrees. You write good copy-hand, I expect?”

“Oh yes,” I said, remembering Everra’s relentless lessons.

“I need a copyist. And a man with a really good memory would be of great use to me too, since I’ve been having some trouble with my eyes.” He said it easily, and his dark eyes seemed clear enough, but there was a wincing in his face as he spoke, and I saw Gry’s quick glance at him. “For instance, now . . . if I was needing a reference from Denios for a lecture, and couldn’t remember what comes after *Let the swan fly to the northlands*—?”

I took up the lines—

> Let grey gander fly beside grey goose,
> North in the springtime: it is south I go.

“Ah!” Memer said, all alight. “I love that poem!”

“Of course you do,” Caspro said. “But it’s not a well-known one, except to a few homesick southerners.” I thought of the homesick northerner, Tadder, who lent me the volume of Denios where I’d read the poem. Caspro went on, “I was thinking that having a kind of live anthology about the house could be very useful to me. If such work seemed at all attractive to you, Gavir. Anything you didn’t have by heart you could help me look up, of course. I have a good many books. And you could be getting on with your work at the University. What do you think, Gry?”

His wife was sitting down on the pavement with Melle. She reached up and took his hand, and for a moment they gazed at each other with a calm intensity of love. Melle looked from her to him. She looked hard at him, frowning, studying him.

“It seems an excellent idea,” Gry said.

“You see, we have a couple of spare rooms here,” he said to me. “One of them is Memer’s, as long as she’ll let us keep her—through next winter at the very least. There are a couple of rooms up in the attic, where we had two young women from Bendraman living until just lately, students. But they went back to Derris Water to astonish the good priests with their learning, so the rooms are vacant. Waiting for you and Melle.”

“Orrec,” said his wife, “you should give Gavir time to think.”

“Dangerous thing, often, time to think,” he said. He looked at me with a smile that was both apologetic and challenging.

“I would— It would— We would—” I couldn’t get a finished sentence out.

“To me it would be a great pleasure to have a child in the house,” Gry said. “This child. If it pleased Melle.”

Melle looked at her, then at me. I said, “Melle, our hosts are inviting us to stay with them.”

“With Shetar?”

“Yes.”

“And Gry? And Memer?”

“Yes.”

She said nothing, but nodded and went back to stroking the lion’s thick fur. The lion was faintly but perceptibly snoring.

“Very well, that’s settled,” said Caspro in particularly broad Uplands dialect. “Go get your things out of the Quail and move in.”

I was hesitant, incredulous.

“Did you not see me, half your life ago, in your visions, and I spoke your name? Were you not coming here to me?” he said, quietly but fiercely. “If we’re guided, are we to argue with the guide?”

Gry watched me with a sympathetic eye.

Memer looked at Caspro, smiling, and said to me, “It’s very hard to argue with him.”

“I—I don’t want to argue,” I stammered. “It’s only—” And I stopped again.

Melle got up and sat down by me on the bench, pressing close against me. “Beaky,” she whispered. “Don’t cry. It’s all right.”

“I know,” I said, putting my arm around her. “I know it is.”

TALKS AND INTERVIEWS ABOUT THE NOVELS

The Young Adult in the YA (2004)

Some Assumptions about Fantasy (2004)

Interview with Paola Castagno (2006)

Interview with Brian Attebery (2007)

Interview with Alexander Chee (2008)

The Young Adult in the YA

Talk delivered to the American Library Association
2004

IF ANYBODY knows what Young Adult fiction is, it's you—this audience. I feel foolish trying to say anything about it to you. I tried writing vast generalities about Young Adult fiction and discovered that all I really know is what I do, insofar as I know what that is. The truth is, I just *did* Young Adult fiction without thinking about it. And it's very nice to be told by the Margaret Edwards Award that I did it satisfactorily. But I still don't know what it was I was doing.

How did I begin doing it? Unexpectedly. Herman Schein of Parnassus Press, who had published my mother's books for young children, wanted to publish books for older kids, and so he asked me to write one—a fantasy.

And I said, Oh no, no, I can't do that, I haven't written anything for children, don't know how, quite impossible, thank you very much, and ran away.

And I got home and rued my words. (Nobody can rue words more truly than a writer.) I'd never been asked to write a book. I'd submitted stories and novels for ten years to publishers who hadn't asked for them and didn't want them, and now, a *proposal*? Oh yes, yes! But no: I haven't written for kids, I have no idea what it involves, I don't like thinking about a specific audience, I refuse to put any restrictions on my imagination or vocabulary, and the stuff I want to write about isn't teen-age stuff. And a fantasy, he said. Like Tolkien? Oh my heavens! Compete with Shakespeare, sure! Forget it.

But thinking about Tolkien took my mind away to thinking about wizards . . . and so to something that had bothered me about

wizards . . . Prospero, Merlin, Gandalf, all old. Peaked hat, white beard. Why? What were they before they were old beardy men? Young men—beardless. Kids. How did kids get to be old wizards? By being young wizards, evidently. Learning the craft, going to . . . wizard school?

Huh. Hey. *There's* an idea.

This is not a claim to have invented it. I plant no flags and do not pee on fences. In *The Sword in the Stone*, T. H. White has Merlin say something funny about going to wizard school, and I'm sure there are other predecessors. But, in 1968 nobody I knew of had worked the idea out.

And it took hold of me like a bulldog. No, more like a boa constrictor—it enwrapped and devoured me. I became it. This is what writing novels is like. Being an elephant living inside a boa constrictor. The Little Prince knew all about it.

The conception was not just of a school of magic, but of a child gifted with an essentially unlimited power who needs—urgently needs—to learn how to know and control such power. That is a big idea. It reverberates. It contains worlds.

So, a few months later the elephant emerged from the boa constrictor as *A Wizard of Earthsea*. Herman Schein was happy with it, and his wife Ruth designed its marvelous cover. And I was happy, too—I had a book I knew was closer to what I'd hoped to write than anything I'd yet written.

I think it was Herman who first said to me, don't worry about the vocabulary and the audience and all that: all a novel has to do to be Young Adult is have a protagonist over twelve and under twenty.

Is there anything else in fact that makes a YA a YA? It sounds like a rhetorical question, but it isn't; I really am asking you.

There may be other rules for the YA novel, and I may have even followed them in my YA novels. Writers do a great many things of which they are not only unconscious but ignorant. Don't let the naïve fallacy of authorial omnipotence or the critical fallacy of authorial intent fool you for a minute. A book is planned, always, to some extent, and some books are very closely planned; but many of us fiction writers work in the dark, perhaps more than any other artists except poets, because we work with language inside the mind. We cannot be thinking about what we write as we write, because we are using the principal tool of thinking, language, to write with—and we have to use it for writing, not for thinking. We cannot

be intellectually, articulately conscious of what we're doing as we write, any more than we can be intellectually, articulately conscious of the actual process and intent of typing on a keyboard while we type. To think about it consciously, in words, would stop us right there, fingers frozen above the keys—mind frozen above the plot.

And therefore, fiction writers learn, taoistically, to cherish our ignorance and trust it to do our job.

So long as we have been to wizard school.

We do have to learn the craft. That's all we have under our control and can use intentionally: craft. It takes us a long way. We are crafty people. The rest is gift.

So, whatever rules I was ignorantly following, the *Wizard* came out and was approved as a YA, taking my publisher rather by surprise at how it went on selling.

Now, here is an example of intentionality in book-planning: I had wondered why wizards were always not only whitehaired, but white men. (I wasn't ready yet to question the gender, only the color.) The only reason for the whiteness of wizards seemed to be that our fantasy tradition came largely from Northern Europe, with its weird skin-color hang-ups. So I just reversed the convention. My hero and all his people are reddish-brown to black, while the more villainous or barbaric types are white. Some readers notice this, many don't. Fine. I like my subversions to be more sneaky than preachy.

That was a deliberate, political decision, made "outside" the writing. Here, on the other hand, is an example of unintentionality, the stuff you write while you're following your story, "ignorantly," without knowing what it implies. A year or so after the *Wizard* came out, I was surprised to discover that it was full of hints of more to come. Right on the first page I had written about:

> the man called Sparrowhawk, who in his
> day became both dragonlord and Archmage.
> His life is told of in the Deed of Ged and
> in many songs, but this is a tale of the time
> before his fame, before the songs were made.

Now I'd thought this was just a crafty trick, learned mostly from Dunsany and Tolkien: the indication of time before the story and time after it and a great geography all around it, which gives the story a chance to reverberate.

But there was more to it than that. I had announced on the first page that Ged was a dragonlord and the Archmage. When I wrote that sentence I didn't know who Ged was, didn't know what an Archmage was, let alone a dragonlord.

So. How did he do that, how did he get there—what did those words mean?

I learned who he was and what archmages and dragonlords were by writing the first book; but Ged himself got there between books, while I wasn't watching. I was in the second book, looking away, looking east to the Kargad Lands, writing about a girl who, like him, had been given a terrible power, but unlike him wasn't taught rightly how to handle it.

People ask forever, where do you get your ideas from, and I have written several essays about it and still have no idea where I get my ideas from—except some of them. *The Tombs of Atuan* came directly from a three-day trip to eastern Oregon: the high desert, the high, dry, bony, stony, sagebrush and juniper country (just about as far as you can get from this soggy Florida). It wasn't the first time I'd seen desert, I am a Westerner after all, but it was the first time I had stayed in desert country, heard that silence, walked in twilight on that dangerous, infinitely fragile land. And driving home with the car full of kids and sweat and dust and twigs of sagebrush, I knew I was in love and had a book. The landscape gave it to me. It gave me Tenar and where she lived.

So the *Wizard* got a sequel; and soon I started the third book, *The Farthest Shore*, planning to follow Ged in it, and then a final one that would follow Tenar. Because my publishers—Atheneum by then—my splendid editor was Jean Karl—thought of the books as YA, I knew I had to have a young protagonist; but Earthsea had to have a king, too. So there you are. Young prince meets older wizard and they go sailing off together into death. Nothing to it.

So having found out what happened to Ged, I started on the fourth book, the one where I was to find out what happened to Tenar. I wrote a chapter, and stopped, because I didn't understand what was happening to Tenar. She

had given up magic, she was a farmwife with a couple of kids. What was she thinking of?

It took me 17 years to find out. During those years, the second wave of feminism broke, and I learned how to write as myself, from the sensibility and intellect of a grown woman. That had not been the commonest thing in any genre, including realism; and fantasy had been particularly male-centered. It was a radical change. And a great one. I am lucky to have lived to see it and be part of it.

The key to my fourth book of Earthsea was not Tenar herself, but Therru, a young child who has been terribly used. When I saw that child I had my book. But Therru is not yet an adolescent and not even a protagonist, and everybody else in the story is middle-aged. Where is the obligatory teenager?

I have to confess I didn't worry about it. I'd grown up, my characters had grown up; if I thought about it I guess I thought, well, I hope my readers have grown up too. I went ahead and wrote the book I had to write. At the end the king was on his throne, the lovers were in each other's arms, and my private title for it was Better Late than Never. Publicly I called *Tehanu* "the last book of Earthsea" because I thought it was. Oh idiot author.

It was met with some shrill accusations of man-hating feminism from people who think being a hero means you always win. But I guess most of my readers had indeed grown up, because they liked it fine. And I was happy again because I had brought my tale to its happy ending—ha, ha.

Again, omens and indications in the text, hints of story to come . . . And this time, to jog my obliviousness, letters from readers: Who is going to be the next Archmage? Who or what is Tehanu? What are the dragons?

And a huge blooper, which I had already realised with horror and hoped nobody would notice, but of course they did, though they were very kind and tactful about bringing it to my attention: the Master Summoner in the third book is dead; but in the fourth book he is alive and apparently well on Roke Island. Oh idiot idiot author!

Sometimes your mistake is your guide. I'd heard Rusty Schweikart the astronaut tell the tale of how when he went outside the space craft to do some external repair, he forgot a tool he needed, and while they were getting it to him, he had the first free time he had ever had on the mission

—no programmed activity for five whole minutes. Hanging there on his lifeline in space, idle, because of a mistake, because of something he forgot, he had time to look around. And he looked, and he saw the Earth. The Earth his home, immense and fragile, shining there among the stars. A vision that changed his life forever.

That's a beautiful and useful learning story, and I used it. I looked at what I'd got wrong, and saw why it was wrong—because right wasn't quite what I'd thought it was.

By way of answering some of the questions I'd caused by absentmindedly reviving the dead, or had otherwise left unanswered, I wrote the various *Tales of Earthsea*, in which I finally established a coherent history. Certain features that, in 1968, I'd just bought wholesale from the heroic fantasy tradition—such as the supremacy and celibacy of male wizards—I had to really think about now, and explain, and fit into my Earthsea as I now perceived it, seen not only from the top, from the seats of power, but from below, through the eyes of the powerless, women and children, ordinary people. Some people think this change of view has led to a loss of enchantment in the stories. I don't. The last Tale led me straight into a nest of dragons. Soon after that, I wrote *The Other Wind*, which brings together all those questions: who Tehanu is; who the dragons are; and how, when clever people meddle with it through hubris or fear, death itself might go wrong.

There are young people in these last two books—Irian/ Dragonfly, young Ogion, my dear Kargish Princess—but the books don't obey the teenage protagonist rule, and I don't think they're definably YA. Yet kids as well as adults seem to buy and read them, and I've had no protests so far about the advanced senility of Ged and Tenar. Why are the books thus forgiven?

Is it because they're fantasy? Is this a well-known fact, which I have just discovered with cries of Eureka!—that fantasy doesn't have to follow the YA rule, because it bridges the gaps between age-groups?

We read *Alice in Wonderland* or *The Wind in the Willows* first at eight, or earlier if they're read to us, and again at twelve, maybe, and again maybe every decade or so: and every time we read them we're a different person, yet each time, if we let them do it, they give us what is "appropriate to our age-group"—kiddies or mid-lifers or wrinklies. The

Jungle Books contain stories that one may read happily at ten and understand with a hard jolt at forty-five. *Kim*, with its child/adolescent hero and its story that treads just on the edge of the fantastic, is a joy that only deepens with the decades. *The Once and Future King* is as magical, exasperating, fascinating, and moving to me now as it was when it was published. *The Hobbit* doesn't carry across the kid-to-adult gap reliably for everyone, but (going the other direction in Middle Earth) nine-year-olds are now reading *The Lord of the Rings*. Yet *The Lord of the Rings* is a fully adult book about fully adult concerns, with no children in it at all. Short adults, yes. But no kids.

So, the Edmund Wilsons of the world croak, what else is new? Fantasy is *all* infantile. Childish escapism. Mindmush. Talking animals, elves, bushwa! I was charmed to learn that somebody said of Edmund Wilson that he always thought he was the only grown-up in the room. It is a common delusion of critics. It shouldn't be encouraged, but it can be ignored.

What should not be ignored is the curious capacity fantasy has of satisfying both the child and the adult—and even, most particularly, that creature of tormented and insatiable and uncomprehended and infinite needs and longings, the adolescent. How does fantasy do it? Or what does it do that none of the other genres including realism does?

Fantasy is the oldest form of literature. Even if story-telling began with Oog reciting to the family around the fire in the cave the true and factual story of How I Killed a Mammoth, you and I know that Oog's tale was not totally realistic. Elements of fantasy slipped in—the size of the mammoth, the length of the tusks, the intrepidity of Oog . . . It got better every time he told it. And after a couple of generations, maybe it was the tale of How Great Hero Father Oog slew the Lord of the Mammoths, which is why we are the People of the Long Tusk—a legend, a myth. A work of the imagination. A fantasy.

They all begin in the same place, the place in our mind that knows what story is. What reality may be, what really happened, we cannot tell; what we can tell is the story, the infinitely flexible, wonderfully rearrangeable, extremely useful story. With it we remake reality. We remake it according to our desires and according to our needs. The truth of story is not fact. Neither is it wishful thinking. Story tells human truth, serving human

community and spiritual longing. And the stories that call most on the imagination work on a deep level of the mind, beneath reason (therefore incomprehensible to rationalists), using symbol as poetry does to express what can't be said directly, using imagery to express what can't be perceived directly—using indirection to indicate the truthward direction.

And here myth and imaginative fiction run a risk; all fiction does, but it's particularly destructive to fantasy: the risk of being rationalised—interpreted, reduced to allegory, read as a message.

Such reduction is a nefarious act. Teachers and critics indulge in it with the best of motives, but they leave ruin in their wake. Fortunately, the strongest fantasies simply shrug off interpretation like a horse twitching off a fly. Everybody wants to tell us what *Alice in Wonderland* means, and the more they talk about Charles Dodgson and Victorian mores and mathematics and the libido, the farther they get from Lewis Carroll and Alice, who go on about their business on the chess board among the dodos, quite intact.

Take the currently almost unquestioned assumption that fantasy concerns a Battle Between Good and Evil. This assumption permits the author to declare one side good and the other bad without further inquiry as to what makes a person or an action good or evil. The heroes and the villains are equally arrogant, competitive, thoughtless, and bloody-minded, and so the Battle goes on till the Problem of Evil is solved in a final welter of violence and a win for the so-called Good team.

Being akin to legend and folktale and myth, with no necessary allegiance to modernism or realism or any limiting school of fiction, fantasy draws its scenery and characters and images and symbols from the whole range of human story-telling back to ancient times; and it doesn't have to clothe its people with distracting realistic trappings and contemporary disguises but can present them quite nakedly—the brave man, the kind woman, the mistreated child, the villain, the king, the traitor, the fool. Character is often less important in fantasy than role. To a careless reader such stark stuff may appear to be morally simplistic, black-and-white. And when it's carelessly written, that's what it is.

But careless reading of careful fantasy will not only miss nuance, it will miss the whole nature and quality of the work. Fantasy is in fact particularly suited to examining the *differences between* good and evil,

both in act and in intent. The imagination is a powerful instrument of ethics. Imaginative literature offers the opportunity to test motive and behavior, to see how the unconscious may control the seemingly rational, to understand how the bravest deed may leave a track of ruin, to ask what the road to Hell is paved with, and why.

Americans think obsessively in terms of war and battle. The battle of life, the war between good and evil—these have always been suspect metaphors; in this time of ultimate weaponry they are actively dangerous. By glibly sanctioning violence as a solution, they prevent thought.

I don't write about wars between good and evil. What I write about—like most novelists—is people making mistakes, and people—other people or the same people—trying to prevent or correct those mistakes, while inevitably making more mistakes. The "problem of evil" in Earthsea is pretty much what it is here: that people don't or won't recognise the evil they do. In the first book, Ged doesn't know who he is, because he doesn't recognise his own shadow, the shadow we all cast.

Immature people crave and demand moral certainty: This is bad, this is good. Adolescents struggle to find a sure moral foothold in this bewildering world; they long to feel they're on the winning side, or at least a member of the Good team. To them, heroic fantasy may offer a vision of moral clarity. But a fictive battle between unquestioned Good and unexamined Evil is a mere excuse for violence—as brainless, useless, wasteful, and base as aggressive war in the real world. I hope that teenagers can struggle through these fakes to find the real heroic fantasies, like Tolkien's. I know such fantasies continue to be written. They don't have to be written for kids; kids will find them, whoever they're written for.

Which brings me to my final thought about Young Adult fiction. When I was in my teens, I certainly didn't feel that in order to interest me a book had to be about teenagers. I got enough of them at school, pimply creeps like me. I wanted to know about being grown up: and novels offered a chance to find out what that was like from inside. Kittens playing are playing cat.

So like all reading children who have the chance (which usually means the public library), I read way ahead of myself, blundering into Austen and Voltaire and Dostoyevsky and Dinesen and Dunsany and Steinbeck and

Forster and you name it, understanding bits and not understanding lots; but that's how we learn to speak and read, isn't it?—by doing it: not word-by-word-exactly-correct, but with mistakes and misunderstandings, in bits and gulps and clumps that finally begin to stick together and make sense. Literature is a major tool for understanding the world and the life we have to live, and we learn to use it by using it.

The rule that the YA book should be about young adults may apply chiefly to the realistic novel of contemporary teen-age life and problems and to historical novels. In other genres, the adolescent reader doesn't seem to demand adolescent protagonists. That all the characters are adult doesn't stop a kid from reading *The Virginian*, or any other good Western; the Sherlock Holmes books, or any other good mystery; C. S. Forester, or Nordhoff and Hall, or Patrick O'Brian, or any other good sea story; or any science fiction story at all. Fantasy appeals to kids even earlier than the other genres, but much genre literature is like fantasy in this: once you're old enough to read it, it doesn't matter how old you *or* the characters are. Nine to ninety, as they say.

I suspect this whole talk has been an attempt to justify myself to myself for continuing the Young Adult trilogy of Earthsea with a trilogy of Old Adult Earthsea. But I have atoned! My next book, *Gifts*, is a YA with an unimpeachably, impeccably adolescent hero and heroine. Now, of course, I am thinking of following those two kids to find out what happens to them when they're thirty . . . but that is another story.

Some Assumptions about Fantasy

Talk delivered at Book Expo America
June 4, 2004

IT SEEMS very strange to me to fly 4000 miles to speak for ten minutes at breakfast. To me breakfast is when you don't speak. At most you grunt. Nothing more than that should be required. I wish I could just grunt at you in a friendly, polite way that meant "Thank you all for being wonderful people who bring children's books to children!" and then sit down among a chorus of moderately appreciative grunts. However.

It was suggested that I tell you things like how I create children's books and why, and how my books are part of my life. That is exactly the kind of subject that I can't even grunt about. I don't know anything about how or why, only about what.

So, what are my books for kids and young adults? All but one of them are fantasies, including the new one, so I will grunt about fantasy.

Some assumptions are commonly made about fantasy that bother me. These assumptions may be made by the author, or by the packagers of the book, or both, and they bother me both as a writer and as a reader of fantasy. They involve who the characters are, when and where they are, and what they do. Put crudely, it's like this: in fantasy, (1) the characters are white; (2) they live sort of in the middle ages; and (3), they're fighting in a battle between good and evil.

Assumption 1: The characters are white. Even when they aren't white in the text, they are white on the cover. I know, you don't have to tell me about sales! I have fought many cover departments on this issue, and mostly lost. But please consider that "what sells" or "doesn't sell" can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. If black kids, Hispanics, Indians (both eastern and

western), don’t buy fantasy, which they mostly don’t, could it be because they never see themselves on the cover?

I have received letters that broke my heart, from adolescents of color in this country and in England, telling me that when they realised that Ged and the other Archipelagans in the Earthsea books are not white people, they felt included in the world of literary and movie fantasy *for the first time*. Worth thinking about?

Assumption 2: Fantasy Land is the middle ages. It isn’t. It’s an alternate world, outside our history, and its map isn’t on our map. It may resemble mediaeval Europe in being pre-industrial—but that doesn’t justify its having no economics and no social justice. Nor does it explain why nobody there ever feeds or waters their horses, which run all day and night just like a Prius. The best send-up ever of this fifth-hand Tennyson setting is Monty Python’s *Holy Grail*, where horses are replaced with coconuts. Whenever I find a fantasy that is set in a genuinely imagined society and culture instead of this lazy-minded, recycled hokum, I feel like setting off fireworks.

Assumption 3: Fantasy by definition concerns a battle between Good and Evil. This is the cliché the cover copy writers love.

There are lots of fantasies about the Battle Between Good and Evil (the BBGE), sure. In them, you can tell the Good guys from the Evil guys by their white hats, or their white teeth, but not by what they do. They all behave exactly alike, with mindless and incessant violence, until the Problem of Evil is solved in a final orgy of savagery and a win for the Good team.

Many fantasy movies and most interactive games go in for the BBGE, which partly explains the assumption that books do the same. And it’s true that in fantasy, character is often less important than role (also true of Greek tragedy and much of Shakespeare, where role and character can be almost, if never quite, the same thing). Carelessly read, such stark stuff may appear to be morally simplistic, black-and-white. Carelessly written, that’s what it is. But careless reading of carefully written fantasy will not only miss nuance, it will miss the whole nature and quality of the work.

This has happened over and over to *The Lord of the Rings*—it has been carelessly read, through the dark glass of assumption and prejudice, and so misread as a simplistic morality tale. Even in the film version, where,

though Tolkien's plot is followed faithfully and the Ring is destroyed, the focus on violent action and the interminable battle scenes overshadow and fatally reduce the moral complexity and originality of the book, the mystery at its heart.

As for my stuff, how or why anybody could call it a battle between Good and Evil is beyond me. I don't write about battles or wars at all. It seems to me that what I write about—like most novelists—is people making mistakes and people—other people or the same people—trying to prevent or correct those mistakes while inevitably making more mistakes.

Immature people (of any age) crave and demand moral certainty: This is bad, this is good. Kids and adolescents struggle to find a sure moral foothold in this bewildering world; they long to feel they're on the winning side, or at least a member of the team. To them, heroic fantasy may offer a vision of moral clarity. Unfortunately, the pretended Battle Between (unquestioned) Good and (unexamined) Evil obscures instead of clarifying, serving as a mere excuse for violence—as brainless, useless, and base as aggressive war in the real world.

I hope that teenagers find the real heroic fantasies, like Tolkien's. I know such fantasies continue to be written. And I hope the publishers and packagers and promoters and sellers of fantasy honor them as such. While fantasy can indeed be mere escapism, wish-fulfillment, indulgence in empty heroics and brainless violence, it isn't so by definition—and shouldn't be treated as if it were.

Fantasy is a literature particularly useful for embodying and examining the real difference between good and evil. In an America where our reality may seem to have been degraded to posturing patriotism and self-righteous brutality, imaginative literature continues to question what heroism is, to examine the roots of power, and to offer moral alternatives. Imagination is the instrument of ethics. There are many metaphors beside battle, many choices besides war, and most ways of doing right do not, in fact, involve killing anybody. Fantasy is good at thinking about those other ways. Could we assume, for a change, that it does so?

Interview with Paola Castagno

2006

Castagno: *The first of the Books of the Western Shore*, Gifts, *has just been released by Editorial Minotauro in Spain, with the title translated as "Los Dones." What is the origin of this saga? What audience is it oriented to?*

Le Guin: For some reason (perhaps I had been reminded of the Bach family, with its generations of musicians) I began to wonder: what would it be like for a child who is assumed to be gifted in a certain way but is not so gifted—a young Bach who was tone-deaf?

Or the child of a family with supernatural powers, who has not inherited the power . . . How and when would the child discover this lack? What to do about it? What if the child had some entirely different, unlooked-for gift? Would that be recognised?

So my story began to grow.

As it was a story of growing up, it was published as a "Young Adult" book (that is a specific category here; does it exist in Spain?). But the audience for fantasy is really everybody of any age over ten, except those sad puritans who won't read fantasies . . .

Castagno: *In this first book we find clear examples about how misunderstandings sometimes arise between parents and children. Is Canoc really as selfish as Orrec judges him? Or is he only trying to protect his son?*

Le Guin: Fathers and sons often have a great deal of trouble understanding one another, no?—particularly when the son thinks he is a disappointment to his father. I think Canoc is a kind and upright man, but he has a very terrible power, which controls him, in a way. If he allows

himself to become angry he could kill his son without meaning to; but if he must repress his anger, it is hard for him to express his love. A question the reader must decide is whether or not Canoc believes that Orrec has the family's dreadful "gift."

Castagno: *The second of these books*, Voices, *has already been published in England and the USA, and you have announced that the third part*, Powers, *will be released soon (and we hope that they will be also published in Spanish). Are they a trilogy? Do Orrec and Gry continue their adventures in these books?*

Le Guin: It isn't a trilogy in the sense of following one story through three books. They are three separate stories, taking place in different parts of the "Western Shore." Orrec and Gry play a major part in the second book, and appear towards the end of the third.

I too hope they will be published in Spanish!

Castagno: *The most popular sagas that you have written are, probably, Earthsea and Ekumen. Occasionally, some readers think to find some details suggesting that the Thousand Islands of Earthsea are located in some planet of the Ekumen, but it may be probably only self-suggestion. Have you ever thought about writing a story where both universes collide? Are you planning to continue any of these sagas?*

Le Guin: The only thing Earthsea and the worlds of the Ekumen have in common, that I know of, is hemmen trees. But on Gethen they are just trees, whereas on Roke Island they are entirely magical. Magic exists in the fantasy series, and does not exist in the science-fiction series: that alone would make it quite nonsensical to try to mix the worlds together. They would merely damage each other.

I am never perfectly certain what might happen next, but it appears to me that Earthsea, which is one single story told through six books, came to its proper ending with *The Other Wind*. The Ekumen novels have little in common one with another, they form no whole, and so there is no reason why there should not be more of them. But I have been doing something entirely different lately.

Castagno: *From all the worlds you have created, which would you like to live in? Or would you prefer to be a "mobile," visiting all of them?*

Le Guin: Yes, a mobile, that's what I've always been!

Castagno: *What is the role that women play in modern fantasy literature? Is it hard for a woman to find her place in this world?*

Le Guin: Well, I think it's easier since I and some of my contemporaries began writing fantasy and science-fiction novels that were not male-centered.

Obviously there is nothing inherently misogynist about fantasy—on the contrary, modern imaginative literature offers the chance to imagine worlds and societies where women have a kind of power and freedom that they lack here. Girls and young women often read fantasy novels just for a glimpse of that power and freedom.

Castagno: *You offered to Mr. Miyazaki a really unique opportunity: To make a film about the (untold) story of Ged, in the years between* The Tombs of Atuan *and* The Farthest Shore. *However, his son made the second adaptation of your books, but the final result isn't much related to the original work. Why do you think that filmmakers find it so hard to be true to the story, pace and spirit of Earthsea?*

Le Guin: I don't know. It was a bitter disappointment to me.

Possibly, one thing that contributed to this curious disregard for the text is the fact that the author is a woman. Both the Sci Fi Channel and Studio Ghibli are extremely male-centered (Hayao Miyazaki's heroes are mostly girls, but his studio is run entirely by men.) I wonder if the men think: well, this isn't Professor Tolkien, this is just an old lady, and women don't really know what they're doing, so we will rewrite this story (inserting a great deal of hysteria and bloodshed by the way) and make her book into our big macho movie. Such co-optation and misrepresentation of women's writing by men is quite frequent.

Castagno: *When you were contacted to make the first movie about Earthsea, you found it very interesting to have Philippa Boyens writing the script. Do you think that she (together with Peter Jackson and Fran Walsh) did a good adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien's* The Lord of the Rings? *Do you think that the liberties (very criticized by some Tolkien fans) they took with the original work, are acceptable in a project like this? Do you think it is harder to bring the world of Earthsea to the big screen than Middle-Earth?*

Le Guin: I think the script written for the Peter Jackson film was in many ways quite marvelous. And I think a filmmaker must absolutely be allowed all kinds of liberties in turning a novel into a film. They are such different forms!

What I found unsatisfactory in the film was its increasing obsession with scenes of war and battle; and most of all, its failure to catch any hint of what I think may be the secret of Tolkien's narrative magic: the constant and powerful alternation of tension and relaxation, war and peace, the public and the domestic, fear and reassurance, light and dark . . . His book has the pace of a heartbeat; of a person walking; of day and night succeeding each other . . . That is why people reading it "live in the book"—it has the rhythm of life.— Film, of course, is a kind of drama, and must be more concentrated, faster in its pacing; but the film goes too far that direction. It is all action, little thought; all noise, no stillness; all Yang, no Yin. And therefore, though beautiful and entertaining, it is profoundly untrue to Tolkien's story.

I don't think it would be very hard to do a film of Earthsea, now that dragons are so much easier to film! Many years ago Michael Powell and I wrote a script, combining the first two books, which was brief, lively, and perfectly true to the spirit of the books. But Hollywood wasn't doing fantasy then . . . I've seen other attempts at scripting an Earthsea film that showed much promise. The secret would be, perhaps, to aim for beauty not grotesqueness; to ground the characters in their daily life and work, which would make the magic seem all the more magical; and to find drama in the power of normal human emotions, rather than in violence, murder, and warfare justified by crude moralising about good and evil.

(There are a few moments in Goro Miyazaki's "Gedo Senki" where he did all this, and one can glimpse the film that might have been . . .)

Interview with Brian Attebery

February 17, 2007

On Gifts and *Gifts*

Attebery: *We've been having various conversations about fantasy since 1979. Since that time there have been tremendous changes in publishing and the academic world and the fantasy readership and maybe your own work since then. Those are some of the things I want to talk about, including your new* Annals of the Western Shore. *We've now had* Gifts *[2004] and* Voices *[2006]. When's the next one due?*

Le Guin: Next fall. [*Powers,* available September 2007]. There was a delay of a year.

Attebery: *I was wondering how you found your way into that world of the Western Shore.*

Le Guin: The first book came as the idea of a person who was expected to have a gift. Everybody thought he had the gift, and it would be reasonable for him to have the gift. But he didn't. It was basically reversing young Ged's situation in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, where a kid who can't be expected to have a gift has one. That's another set of problems. And then as the idea grew in my head, I thought, what if he had the *wrong* gift, as it were. He didn't have the one he was thought to have, he had something else. So it was sort of a double whammy. That put me, as an idea like that will do, in the Uplands, among the people there. I had to figure out, just what are these gifts that these people have? They turn out to be fairly dire ones.

Attebery: *When misinterpreted.*

Le Guin: Yes, actually, it seems as if they've been misused, partly because these people have been marginalized and shoved up into a very poor part of the country and don't have much enlightenment offered them. They're like a bunch of benighted highlanders in Scotland, where life is just so tough you just can't think about it very much. But it turns out to be fortunate for Orrec not to have the gift that he is supposed to have, because the one he is supposed to have seems to be completely destructive.

Attebery: *With fantasy, I think it can be disastrous to try to look for messages and morals, but what I see usually is a web of threads reaching out of the book into the world, so that issues and people and places are imperceptibly linked to things in the book. Are there any threads like that that you can think of?*

Le Guin: To the real world?

Attebery: *Yes. If that image makes any sense.*

Le Guin: Well, of course, I'm actually writing about real people and real problems, using fantasy metaphors and images, which allow one to separate out a problem such as being expected to be gifted in some way. You know where I think the idea came from? I was thinking, "What if there was a Bach who wasn't musical?" There were sixty-eight members of the Bach family that were all professional musicians at one time. What about the one that wasn't? And I think that's where the idea began to take shape. There are a lot of people who are expected to be talented or gifted in some way in art or in other fields—sports, academe, moneymaking. And that's tough. Family expectation. So I suppose the realism of my story might resonate with a young reader who felt like: "I'm supposed to be so and so, but I'm not; what do I do? I'm nobody."

Attebery: *When you get into the second book, it gets political.*

Le Guin: Well, with *Voices*, I think the parallels to our world are way clearer, because we have a religious conflict going on: a monotheistic, aggressive religion taking over a polytheistic, extremely non-aggressive

culture, trying to wipe it out and saying this is all sinful and wrong. Books are very important in all three—*Gifts*, *Powers*, and *Voices*. Books are central elements of these fantasies. They're books about books. In *Gifts* it's not obvious, because most of the people in the book are illiterate. But Orrec's mother is a lowlander; she can read. She's been taught a great deal of narrative and religious stuff. Then a book comes, gets brought up there, and Orrec can read it because his mother taught him to read. And of course this is his gift.

Attebery: *The unexpected gift.*

Le Guin: The unexpected gift. And the one that's not going to matter to anybody where he lives. It's not going to gain him any merit points.

Attebery: *There seems to be a lot of respect for oral tradition as well.*

Le Guin: Yes, I have a lot of respect for oral tradition.

Attebery: *One of the things that fantasy always seems to have is some relationship to tradition, to myths, legends, and beliefs. And I just got through teaching your story "The Poacher" (1992), which I go back to again and again, because it's the perfect way to get students to think about the power of stories, and the devastating effect of the absence of stories. I see connections between that and the new works. I've always loved the metaphor of the poacher. The character in that story is a poacher in several senses. He has wandered into a familiar story.*

Le Guin: "The Poacher" is the Sleeping Beauty story.

Attebery: *The real heart of that story for me is the fact that the character knows he doesn't belong—he isn't a prince—but he makes an accommodation and chooses not to divert the story in the direction he wants to go.*

Le Guin: I'm not sure he could. I'm not sure it's a choice, as I saw it. Well, he's a person who doesn't belong in a fairy tale.

Attebery: *Is there something about poaching in somebody else's preserve that modern fantasy can do, should do, or should not do?*

Le Guin: Poaching is something like what Lévi-Strauss calls "bricolage"—sneaking in and putting things together.

Attebery: *Is poaching maybe the opposite of fundamentalism? That seems to be more the way oral cultures treat their own mythic materials, I think.*

Le Guin: Well, if I understand the function of narrative, for instance, in American Indian culture, it was, "We told these stories because the stories are about who we are. We are the people who tell these stories." Am I going round and round about this?

Attebery: *A non-vicious circle.*

Le Guin: Yes, right, a benevolent circle. This is how a kid finds out, who I am, who my people are, and what we think about certain things. And it seems clear that stories have this function. And from the very little I know about pre-literate cultures—I know more about American Indian than about any others—I take it this is how Homer's stories functioned in Greece, too. They were told to illiterate people who heard them as, "This is who we are, we are the Greeks, we're the people who had these heroes and who do these things." And clearly this function has to have been inherited by our books, from people who didn't have books but who carried their books in their heads and spoke them to each other, passed them on orally. Now we can write it down, but I think we're doing the same thing; we're saying this is who we are. And it's important for kids to find books that tell them who they are and who their people are.

Attebery: *But it doesn't work the same way when we become fixated on the literal meaning of a story.*

Le Guin: Except that the literal meaning of the story is how you get the story across. I should take you back to my own childhood, when my father would tell us a story. My father would tell Indian stories because he had

heard them from Indian informants. He would translate them into English and tell us maybe a Yurok story, often the ones with monsters and things, the ones kids like, you know: exciting stories. He didn't interpret. He didn't say, "This means that or this happens because . . ." You get the story dropped in your lap and that's it. And you have to riddle it out. Whatever the meaning of the story is, it's not told you as a moral, and it's not obvious. And I will say with an awful lot of American Indian stories I think it's completely impossible for white people to understand what they mean in that sense, because we are of so different a culture that we can never understand what those stories meant to the people who told those stories or heard them. But our stories, you can translate them into meanings, but it is a translation.

Attebery: *Right.*

Le Guin: You know I'm going to resist being interpreted.

Attebery: *What's lost in translation is the essence of the story.*

Le Guin: That's really the whole thing. It's like Cliffs Notes. I think any sensible reader goes mad trying to read Cliffs Notes or any such interpretation and boiling down of a story; you've lost everything that's worth reading. All you're left with is what it "means."

Attebery: *There's a wonderful line from George MacDonald, where he said, "You want me to tell you what my story means, but if my drawing of a horse is so bad that I have to write 'This is a horse' under it, I might as well not draw it."*

Le Guin: You know, there's the famous Dada thing, with a nice accurate picture of a pipe, and underneath in French it says, "This is not a pipe." That's kind of what I want to do with my stories. This is a story with no meaning, this is a meaningless story; this is not a pipe. It just looks like a pipe.

Interview with Alexander Chee

February 5, 2008

Chee: *In* Voices *(Harcourt, 2006), one of your newest novels, you feature a secret and protected library, the home to an oracle in a culture which has decided all of its literature is dangerous and must be destroyed. It reminded me of Poland, before the end of the Cold War, and how they copied books that had been smuggled into the country by typewriter in church basements, to be able to spread them—that was their printing press, the typists. An underground railroad of the book.*

Le Guin: Like samizdat in the USSR. I was told they often used mimeograph to copy illegal books—do people now even know what mimeograph was? You got purple fingers doing it, which could be a giveaway.

Chee: *It seems to me that the book's events have echoes of our current war in Iraq—the destruction, for example, of a culture's literature and a culture where literature is dangerous—this puts me in mind of Donald Rumsfeld's comment in the first months of the war about "what's a few less pots?", specifically, when scholars were alarmed that treasures from the beginning of civilization would be lost. He's the product of a culture that doesn't value what's in a book.*

Le Guin: Well, you and I are products of that same culture, no?

I gather that a lot of the "pots" in the great museum in Baghdad, which we allowed to be looted and then gutted, are now for sale to the highest bidder on the art and archeology black market. This is good capitalism, I guess, while a museum, being a public trust and accessible to all, is anticapitalist, pretty damn near socialist in fact.

I expect Mr. Rumsfeld values what's in a book so long as he can express it in terms of money.

Chee: *I'm wondering, as a writer myself surrounded (like all of us) by this war's effects on us at home, were there any inspirations for these new novels, the* Annals of the Western Shore *series*—Powers, Gifts, Voices—*and their concerns, in the war as it affects our country, and the world, or is it more inspired by living inside the culture that produced the war and the broken pots?*

Le Guin: Probably the latter. I don't see much direct influence of the war on those books, but don't trust my perceptions! I generally avoid analyzing such matters, preferring to leave influences and inspirations down in the ground, where they might continue to sprout, rather than bringing them up into the light where they won't.

Which is why I keep dodging such questions when I do interviews . . . sorry!

The situation in *Voices*—a city occupied by a people who not only don't value books, but whose religion directs them to actively fear and hate books—obviously can be compared to the situation in Baghdad, but very, very generally, not point to point. In Iraq, we have two monotheisms at war; both parties are highly belligerent; the rich attacked the poor; and the war is about oil. In my novel, the conflict is between a monotheism and a polytheism, between a belligerent expansive society and a settled society of traders; the poor attacked the rich, and there's no underlying motivation such as oil reserves, unless the mere prosperity of Ansul can be compared to that. It looks to me as if the Iraq war was certainly on my mind, but didn't shape the book in any specific way, except perhaps hinting at the difference between a "people of the Book" and people who read books.

All three of the *Western Shore* novels are about reading, writing, reciting, literacy, books; it seems to be the drumbeat they walk to.

Chee: *You were about 16 when World War II ended, in your early twenties at the outbreak of the Korean War, and your first books appeared during the darkest years of Vietnam. How much do you think all of these wars have affected you as a writer? Are there moments that stand out?*

Le Guin: Growing up during World War II certainly affected my whole view of life, but I hardly know how, it goes so deep. What's hard to explain now is that, though we were never invaded, and bombed only once and ineffectively on the coast of Oregon, everybody in the country was in that war. Everything we did was influenced by it—eating, traveling, dressing, thinking—everything in daily life. Berkeley was under full blackout. Consider what that means: every window completely covered so that no light can shine out or in. Your house becomes a cave. For all the wars we've been in since, there has been nothing remotely like that. Nobody has had to give up anything or even suffer any inconvenience—except the soldiers, of course. I know that nobody who hasn't been in battle or under attack can know what war is. But even in terms of being safe at home, it's also true that many Americans who think they know what being at war is, don't. Including, of course, Bush and his people. They don't have a clue.

So anyhow, I have that darkness deep and early in my life.

My science fiction novel *The Word for World Is Forest* is clearly a Vietnam War book. Although my preference and tendency is always not to write allegorically and not to use material directly, the year I wrote that book I was in London, unable to protest my country's increasing involvement by direct nonviolent action as I had been doing here. My frustrated anger and shame went pretty directly into the book.

Chee: *You mention in your interview with FEMIN that you had to learn to write as a woman—this was very interesting to me, and I would appreciate anything you could add to that. It describes an amazing gap between what one is and what one must be to live—a gap created by the culture into which one is born, and created by what that culture feels are its necessities, which, I think, is one of your themes. What was the moment when you first became aware that you would need to learn this, and how did you go about it once you knew it was what you must do?*

Le Guin: I like your metaphor of the gap. So many people live in such a gap! And they have to decide whether they want to pretend it isn't there, or find out how to live in it, or try to close it. Or—mostly—life decides that for them. To have a choice at all is to be privileged.

There wasn’t any aha! moment about feminism for me. I just kept reading stuff and thinking. My mind works slowly and obscurely, and I mostly find out what I’m doing by looking at what I’m doing or have done. Mostly I don’t even do that. But when what I do isn’t getting done very well, when it seems to be stuck or going wrong, that induces me to look at it. “What am I doing? Why isn’t it behaving?” This happened in the middle of *The Eye of the Heron*, when Lev insisted on getting himself killed in the middle of the story, leaving my book without a hero, and me wondering what the hell? It took a good deal of backing up and pondering over what I had written to realize that Luz had been the hero all along, that Luz was the one who would lead her people into the wilderness. I can identify that as the moment when I consciously shifted from a male protagonist to a female protagonist, when the male was marginalized and the woman became the center.

But of course that was long after *Left Hand of Darkness*, where the rather naïve male narrator is a deliberate authorial outreach to male readers who (or so I thought at the time) would reject an androgynous central character, particularly in a book by a woman. Estraven’s narrative voice comes in late, and quietly. But, of course, Estraven was the center of the story from the start.

In *The Tombs of Atuan* you can see me centering on a female character, but enabling her to act only in collaboration with a male.

It was a gradual process. It still is.

Chee: *You produced an enviable group of novels early in your career that are still read widely, like* The Left Hand of Darkness, A Wizard of Earthsea, *books that continue to win you readers and fame. It seems to me there’s a moment in between a writer’s first and second book, when you take in what has happened, and weigh it against what you want to happen. I wonder about who the young woman was who set out on this amazing journey of yours, if she had any sense of what was to come, both in terms of the challenges you’ve faced and the successes you’ve had. Can you describe that moment for us, who you were, after your first book was published, but before the second, and where you were, and what your thinking was? How did you cross that gap?*

Le Guin: Well, that wasn't really a gap for me. More like a chute.

My first book was an Ace Double, a pulp-paper paperback, a short science fiction novel. Then you turned the book over and there was another novel, usually by a different author, upside down. (As my brother remarked when I sent him *Rocannon's World* in that original edition, it was a fine story until the middle of the book, but after that he couldn't make head or tail of it.) Anyhow, I was getting some stories published by then, but I had been sending fiction out for ten years before that without getting any of it into print. So once I'd found a publisher for novels, I was charged, ready to go, on a roll. The next two books followed very quickly on *Rocannon's World*. No gap, no cold feet. And when they were published, I had the impetus and the confidence to tackle a big hard story; that was *Left Hand of Darkness*.

I guess the purest moment of triumph I've had was the night a long distance phone call came through to our cabin in the Coast Range, via the neighbor up the hill shouting down through the darkness, since we didn't have a phone there. "Somebody in New York wants you!" It was my agent telling me, through a lot of static, that *Left Hand* had won the Hugo Award, on top of the Nebula earlier that summer. That did make me think "Hey! I really am on the way!" After the kids were in bed, I went and sat on a boulder over the noisy creek in the dark by myself, and thought about the years to come—what I might go on to write, making all sort of naive promises to myself to do it as well as I could. That was a good hour by the creek, under the stars.

But you understand that my triumph was not on a scale to daunt me, only to encourage me. The Hugo and Nebula aren't exactly the Nobel Prize, after all. I have become very critical of the whole book award system and could preach on that subject for quite a while, but I do know what an award can mean to a writer early in her career. It can give an essential validation.

It's probably simply a matter of temperament that I never stopped to wonder if I could "match" what I had done, never choked off my writing by competing with myself, or with anybody else for that matter. My ambition was absolutely centered on the work itself, never on what it would bring me, or "who" it would make me. I never cared about that at all. And I always figured, if this book was good, the next would be better.

That much arrogance is necessary equipment for an artist, I think. Not sufficient, but necessary. It carries one across the gaps.

Chee: *As I prepared for this, I flipped open a book of your essays, the one from Shambhala Press,* The Wave in the Mind, *and found your essay about your story "The Poacher." In that essay, you talk of the myth of Sleeping Beauty, and how "The Poacher" came to be: imagining a young man who doesn't know why the wall of thorns has appeared in his yard, or that a hero with a sword is the one fated to come to part it and rescue the sleeping princess, waking the inhabitants of the castle from the curse. Instead, he just cuts at it with a simple blade, and eventually makes his way through.*

Le Guin: It is important, to my mind, that he has only a poor peasant's tools—no sword, no fine machete, no chainsaw. With clumsy tools, he almost has to chew his way through the awful thorn hedge—so slowly that it keeps growing back, so it takes him ages. Just the opposite of the Prince, whose sword whips the way through at a touch. The Prince of course is the "right one," the Chosen. The peasant boy is a transgressor, the wrong one, the one with no right to succeed. It cannot be easy for him. Only intense passion and obsessive patience can bring him through.

Sort of like the practice of an art, yes. Passion, patience, obsession.

Chee: *I loved the idea in the essay of fairy tales as a kind of literary influence that you can't really know, for how you're exposed to them so young, and they shape you before you know you're being shaped. Also, though, the idea of "breaking into the spell," instead of breaking the spell.*

I'd been out drinking with Shakespearean actors and scholars, the week previous, and one of them said, Witches make for good literature. I thought of your career, and how realism, as a literary mode, is very young, and yet for Americans, it has been insisted on as the only literary mode. Of late, I've found myself suspicious of this American realism, for how it demands the reader accept that this is what reality is, and how in that there's forced order and compliance.

Le Guin: I like that statement very, very much.

Chee: *There's a truculent, bullish feeling to the way it's enforced.*

Le Guin: Truculent and bullish is right on target.

Chee: *I had the vague idea that this idea of breaking into the spell possibly describes your body of work as a whole, an act you repeat—that you are a bit like the Poacher, the farmer scraping against the wall he found and didn't build, knowing there was something he wanted on the other side. The image of you in those blacked out rooms, the relationship to writing as a woman you described, your relationship to literary realism, science fiction and fantasy. A woman sitting there with a pen and thinking: "Why is this wall here?" And then just cutting into it.*

Le Guin: Well, no, not just cutting into it. Hacking at it with inadequate tools. Hitting the head against it. Gnawing like a rat. Weeping in frustration. Going back to it. Gnawing at it.

In fact he has no idea what is on the other side of the great hedge. He doesn't know there is something he wants on the other side because he doesn't have any idea what might be there. He is simply determined to *get through*. Is this to escape from his hard and hopeless life? Is it to escape from or somehow to realize his hopeless, half-admitted love for his stepmother? I don't know, but I think he is doing what most of my male and female heroes do: butting his head against a wall, knocking down a barrier, opening a door, enlarging the space available (for life, for thought, for knowledge). Creating freedom. With passion, patience, obsession, transgression.

Chee: *Do you ever feel that the way your work has been cordoned at times as science fiction is a deflection by the mainstream of the very serious critiques these novels contain of our society?*

Le Guin: Yes. I do.

Chee: *Or is it sexism?*

Le Guin: Yes. It is.

Chee: *Was there a moment when you realized the shift in the way you were being treated, when you became taken more seriously by the literary establishment, and do you remember it precisely? To an outsider, it appears recent.*

Le Guin: Actually, I haven't felt a major shift. I am still mostly referred to (dismissed) as a "sci fi writer." When Margaret Atwood writes a serious review of one of my books for *The New York Times*, it is printed under the title "The Queen of Quinkdom," to make sure nobody takes it seriously. I am shortlisted for major awards, but the awards go to people like DeLillo and McCarthy who also write science fiction, using the tropes and loci and metaphors of science fiction, but fastidiously keep their literary skirts from being defiled by the name of genre.

I admire Doris Lessing for calling her science fiction books science fiction; I only wish I liked the books. Atwood herself has walked a very fine and sometimes wavering line trying to keep her science fiction books out of the genre ghetto without trashing the people who live in the ghetto. I can't wait for people like Michael Chabon to finish chainsawing that damn thorn hedge and knocking down all the genre walls. Now, there's a man with courage, Chabon. He just joined the Science Fiction Writers Association. He steps over the walls in both directions.

Most recently, my three books of the *Annals of the Western Shore* have been ignored by both the science fiction community and the literary critics, because they are published as "young adult." The label YA actually means nothing except that the protagonists, or some of them, are young. Publishers like it because it is a secure marketing niche. But the cost of security is exclusion from literary consideration. The walls of disdain around any book perceived as being "for children" are much higher than they were when I began publishing the Earthsea books, forty years ago. Oh, Joshua, won't you blow your horn?

I hoped that *Searoad* might break me out of the genre ghetto, but it was not taken much notice of; though I still think the last piece in it, "Hernes," particularly deserves notice. I hoped that the stories in *Unlocking the Air* might be seen as what they are—belonging fully to the literary tradition (well, to several literary traditions—). No such luck. But no, I take it back: I was given the PEN/Malamud Award for writing short fiction, which

would include that book; but nobody knows what the PEN/Malamud is, because it isn't the PEN/Faulkner.

Sometimes I allow myself to have high hopes of my next book, *Lavinia*, which I know is as good as anything I have written, and which is quite indescribable as anything but "literature," or, preferably, "a novel." But the reviewers have had me stamped and pigeonholed for decades now, and I doubt anything I do can make them actually look at what I do. Only the seal of approval of one of the major literary prizes could do that.

So I expect I must get on without the reviewers and take comfort in the increasing amount of excellent, genuine, hard reading and criticism of my work coming mostly out of universities here and abroad.

Chee: *Why do you think so much new literary fiction takes on fantasy and science fiction, and what sort of thoughts do you have about this? Or popular culture, for that matter? Why do you think we're reaching for aliens, ghosts and vampires so often these days?*

Le Guin: I don't think we're doing so, any more than we always did! I think what's happening is, it's all—fantasy, science fiction, ghosts, trolls, whatever—finally being called, being admitted to be literature. The way it used to be, before the Realists and the bloody Modernists took over. Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, and the walls came atumblin' down.

CHRONOLOGY

NOTE ON THE TEXTS

NOTES

Chronology

1929

Born in Berkeley, California, on St. Ursula's Day, October 21, to Alfred Louis Kroeber and Theodora Covel Kracaw Brown Kroeber. (Father, born in 1876 in Hoboken, New Jersey, completed a doctorate in anthropology at Columbia College under Franz Boas in 1901 and moved to Berkeley to create a museum and department of anthropology at the University of California. In 1911, Ishi, a Yahi Indian and the last survivor of the Yana band, came to work with Kroeber and others at the Museum of Anthropology, where he remained until his death, from tuberculosis, in 1916. Mother, born in 1897 in Denver, Colorado, completed a master's degree in clinical psychology at the University of California in 1920 and married Clifton Spencer Brown in July 1920; they had two children: Clifton Jr., born September 7, 1921, and Theodore "Ted," born in May 1923. Brown died in October 1923, and mother began taking anthropology courses from Alfred Kroeber. They married in March 1926, and Kroeber adopted both sons. They bought a house designed by Berkeley architect Bernard Maybeck at 1325 Arch Street on the north side of the university campus. Le Guin will later cite [in an essay in the journal *Paradoxa*] the beauty and "integrity" of its design as an early influence. Parents took a field trip to Peru for eight months, shortly after marriage, living in a tent. Brother Karl Kroeber born in Berkeley on November 26, 1926.)

1930

Parents buy a ranch in the Napa Valley, later named Kishamish from a myth invented by brother Karl. Family will spend summers there entertaining visiting scholars, including physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer and both native and white storytellers.

1931

Juan Dolores, a Papago Indian friend and collaborator of A. L. Kroeber's, spends the first of many summers with the Kroeber family at Kishamish.

1932–39

Is taught to write by her brother Ted and goes on doing it. Ursula and Karl, along with Berkeley neighbor Ernst Landauer, invent a world of stuffed animals. Later discovers science fiction magazines, including *Amazing Stories*. Father tells her American Indian stories and myths; she also reads Norse myths. Mother later recalls, "The children wrote and acted plays; they had the 'Barn-top Players' in the loft of the old barn. They put out a weekly newspaper."

c. 1940
Submits first story to *Astounding Science Fiction* and collects her first rejection letter.

c. 1942
With her brothers in the armed services (Clifton joins in 1940, before the war starts for America, Ted in '43, and Karl in '44), Ursula is left without imaginative co-conspirators. In a later interview she recalls, "My older brothers had some beautiful little British figurines, a troop of nineteenth-century French cavalrymen and their horses. I inherited them, and played long stories with them in our big attic. They went on adventures, exploring, fighting off enemies, going on diplomatic missions, etc. The captain was particularly gallant and handsome, with his sabre drawn, and his white horse reared up nobly. Unfortunately, when you took one of them off his horse, he was extremely bow-legged, and had a little nail sticking downward from his bottom, which fit into the saddle. . . . So my brave adventurers lived entirely on horseback. Also unfortunately, there were no females at all for my stories; but when I wrote the stories down, I provided some."

1944–46
In fall, begins attending Berkeley High School. Socially marginal, a good student, reads voraciously outside school, Tolstoy and other nineteenth-century writers, including Austen, the Brontës, Turgenev, Dickens, and Hardy, as well as the Taoist writings of Chinese writer Lao Tzu. Her mother introduces her to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*, which she says she didn't really get until much later. In spring

1946, father retires from Berkeley. Parents travel to England, where father receives the Huxley Medal from the Royal Anthropological Institute.

1947

Graduates high school in class of 3,500, which includes Philip K. Dick. The two never meet, although they later correspond. Father accepts a one-year appointment at Harvard University, and it is decided that, with parents nearby, Ursula will attend Radcliffe College instead of the University of California. Spends summer with parents and Karl in New York City, where father teaches at Columbia University until Harvard appointment begins. They rent an apartment from parents' friends near 116th and Broadway and spend the summer seeing many plays and Broadway shows. Takes recorder lessons with Blanche Knopf. Moves to Radcliffe in the fall. Lives last three college years in Radcliffe cooperative Everett House with close friends Jean Taylor and Marion Ives.

1948

Father returns to Columbia, where he will teach until 1952. Spends summer with parents in New York City, this time in another apartment rented from parents' friends, near 116th and Riverside Drive.

1950

A relationship in her senior year at Radcliffe results in an unplanned pregnancy; an illegal abortion is arranged with the help of friends and parents.

1951

Elected to Phi Beta Kappa. Graduates cum laude from Radcliffe in June, writing a senior thesis titled "The Metaphor of the Rose as an Illustration of the 'Carpe Diem' Theme in French and Italian Poetry of the Renaissance." College acquaintances include John Updike, who marries one of her housemates. Travels to Paris with Karl and begins writing novel *A Descendance*, about the imaginary Central European country of Orsinia, whose name reflects her own: both come from the Latin word for "bear." Starts graduate work at Columbia in the fall. Begins writing and attempting to publish poetry and stories. Father helps her submit poems

for publication, mailing her submissions and also investigating subculture of little magazines.

1952
Completes an M.A. in Renaissance French and Italian language and literature at Columbia University, writing a thesis titled “Aspects of Death in Ronsard’s Poetry” on the sixteenth-century French poet Pierre Ronsard. Begins work on a doctorate at Columbia on the early sixteenth-century poet Jean Lemaire de Belges. Begins writing new Orsinian novel called, variously, *Malafrena* and *The Necessary Passion*.

1953
Receives a Fulbright Fellowship to study in France. Departs from New York on September 23 on the *Queen Mary*. On the ship she meets fellow Fulbrighter Charles Alfred Le Guin (born June 4, 1927, in Macon, Georgia), who is writing his thesis on the French Revolution. On December 22, marries Le Guin in Paris after numerous delays in procuring a marriage license—later says there was “always another tax stamp we needed across the city.” (On the marriage license, a space between “Le” and “Guin” is restored, in a surname that had not had one in America.)

1954
Le Guins return to U.S. on the *Ile de France* ship in August. Ends graduate work and the Le Guins move to Macon, Georgia, where Charles teaches history and Ursula teaches freshman French at Mercer University. Meets Charles’s large extended family. Sees, and is first puzzled and then appalled by, her first sign for a “Colored Drinking Fountain.”

1955
Completes first version of novel *The Necessary Passion*, which she submits to Alfred Knopf, a friend of her father’s, and receives an encouraging rejection letter. In a 2013 interview, Le Guin will recall that “the first novel I ever wrote was very strange, very ambitious. It covered many generations in my invented Central European country, Orsinia. My father knew Alfred Knopf personally. . . . When I was about twenty-three, I asked my father if he felt that my submitting the novel to Knopf would

presume on their friendship, and he said, No, go ahead and try him. So I did, and Knopf wrote a lovely letter back. He said, I can't take this damn thing. I would've done it ten years ago, but I can't afford to now. He said, This is a very strange book, but you're going somewhere! That was all I needed. I didn't need acceptance." Works as a physics department secretary at Emory University in Atlanta, where Charles is completing his Ph.D.

1956

Charles receives his doctorate from Emory and they move to Moscow, Idaho, where they both begin teaching at the University of Idaho. At first they live in poorly insulated temporary housing; in the winter the books in their study freeze to the wall. Out of boredom in a rather insular community, together with friends they fabricate items about an imaginary poetry society (including poems by Le Guin's alter ego Mrs. R. R. Korsatoff) and succeed in placing them on the society page of the local newspaper. Reads *The Lord of the Rings*. Submits manuscript of "Edward and Sylvie," novel set in California, to Knopf, who rejects it while encouraging her to submit elsewhere.

1957

Oldest child Elisabeth Covel Le Guin is born, July 25.

1958

Moves to Portland, Oregon, where Charles takes up position as professor of French history at Portland State University (then College). They buy a Victorian house below Portland's Forest Park, where they will live for the next six decades. Submits novel "Lands End" to Scribner and Houghton Mifflin; both reject it.

1959

Spends summer at Berkeley with parents and Karl's family. The Orsinian poem "Folksong from the Montayna Province" appears in the fall issue of the journal *Prairie Poet*. It is her first published work. Second child Caroline DuPree Le Guin is born, November 4. Mother publishes *The Inland Whale,* a book of retold legends from California Indians, including

the title story, which was learned from Yurok storyteller (and frequent guest at Kishamish) Robert Spott.

1960
Father dies in Paris on October 5 after conducting an anthropology conference in Austria the previous week. Later refers to this as the time when she "came of age, rather belatedly, at age 31."

1961
Mother publishes her most famous work, *Ishi in Two Worlds*, based on her husband's memories and on her own research. Le Guin's Orsinian story "An die Musik" is published in the summer issue of *Western Humanities Review*; she is paid five contributor's copies. The same week it is accepted, she also makes her first commercial sale: the time-travel story "April in Paris" is accepted by editor Cele Goldsmith Lalli for *Fantastic* magazine, for which Le Guin is paid $30. Rewrites *Malafrena*.

1962
Encouraged by a friend, begins reading science fiction writers Philip K. Dick, Harlan Ellison, and Theodore Sturgeon.

1964
Youngest child Theodore Alfred (Theo) Le Guin is born, June 4. (While the children are young she writes mostly after nine at night.) Moves for the academic year to Palo Alto, California, where Charles is a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. Writes her first science fiction novel, *Rocannon's World*. Her turn to science fiction is partly stimulated by reading the American author Cordwainer Smith and her resultant discovery that the genre has become a vehicle for inward as well as outward exploration. In a 1986 interview, she will explain, "To me encountering his works was like a door opening. There is one story of his called 'Alpha Ralpha Boulevard' that was as important to me as reading Pasternak for the first time."

1965
Acting as her own agent, sells *Rocannon's World* to Donald A. Wollheim at Ace Books.

1966

Rocannon's World is published as half of a back-to-back edition, known as an Ace Double, with Avram Davidson's *The Kar-Chee Reign*. Wollheim speaks proudly of finding Le Guin's novel in the slush pile (of manuscripts sent without an agent). Soon afterward, Terry Carr creates the Ace Science Fiction Specials line to feature work by Le Guin, Joanna Russ, and R. A. Lafferty. The character Rocannon is a native of a world called Hain by its inhabitants and Davenant by others. In later books set in the same universe Hain is identified as the oldest human world, and the others (including Terra) as its colonies or (as in the case of Gethen) its experiments. *Planet of Exile* is published in October as half of an Ace Double with Thomas M. Disch's *Mankind Under the Leash*.

1967

City of Illusions is published by Ace Books.

1968

Writes to literary agent Virginia Kidd, herself a writer and editor of science fiction and poetry, asking her to try to sell hardcover rights to a new novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Kidd replies that she will, but only if she can also represent the rest of Le Guin's work. The two work together (though they meet in person only four times) until Kidd's death in 2003. Publishes letter, along with eighty-one other science fiction writers (including Joanna Russ, Samuel R. Delany, and Gene Roddenberry), in *Galaxy* magazine in June protesting U.S. involvement in Vietnam. An opposing prowar letter is signed by seventy-two writers, including Robert A. Heinlein, John W. Campbell, and Marion Zimmer Bradley. In fall, moves to England as part of Charles's sabbatical. During that time she writes "The Word for World Is Forest," set in the Hainish universe but depicting some of the moral issues of the Vietnam War. Fantasy novel *A Wizard of Earthsea* is published in November by Parnassus Press.

1969

A Wizard of Earthsea wins the *Boston Globe–Horn Book* Award for children's literature. *The Left Hand of Darkness* is published by Ace Books as an Ace Science Fiction Special in March. The book's vision of

androgyny is criticized by some feminists as overly cautious, a critique to which Le Guin responds defensively at first and then with a serious rethinking of her concept of gender in essays such as “Is Gender Necessary? Redux” (1976, revised 1987) and the story “Coming of Age in Karhide” (1995). The story “Nine Lives” appears in *Playboy* in November with the byline U. K. Le Guin. The initials are a deliberate ploy by Virginia Kidd, given the gender policies of the magazine. After the story is accepted, the magazine editors ask if they can keep the name in that form to veil the author’s gender from readers. Le Guin agrees, in part because of the large payment the magazine offers, but when asked for an autobiographical statement offers the following, which *Playboy* prints: “The stories of U. K. Le Guin were not written by U. K. Le Guin but by another person of the same name.” Children’s writer and critic Eleanor Cameron writes in praise of *A Wizard of Earthsea* and begins a decades-long correspondence with Le Guin. The two writers are both, at the time, beginning to come to terms with feminism and are working at learning how to write *as* women and *about* female protagonists. This friendship with an older writer presages the many supportive relationships Le Guin is to form with younger women writers such as Vonda N. McIntyre, Karen Joy Fowler, and Molly Gloss. Mother remarries, to artist and art psychotherapist John Quinn, who is forty-three years her junior, on December 14.

1970

The Left Hand of Darkness wins both the Hugo and Nebula Awards for best novel, selected, respectively, by fans and fellow writers. The Science Fiction Foundation is created in England with Le Guin and Arthur C. Clarke as patrons. *The Tombs of Atuan*, second Earthsea novel, is serialized in December in *Worlds of Fantasy* and published by Atheneum in June the following year.

1971

The Lathe of Heaven is serialized in the March and May issues of *Amazing Science Fiction* and published in October by Charles Scribner’s Sons. Le Guin’s first science fiction novel set on Earth, it incorporates her thoughts on dreaming (pioneering dream researcher William Dement is a

consultant), ecological catastrophe, and Taoist ideas of inaction and integrity. At a Science Fiction Writers of America meeting in Berkeley meets Vonda N. McIntyre, who will become a close friend and collaborator. McIntyre invites Le Guin to teach science fiction writing at the first Clarion West workshop at the University of Washington.

1972

The Tombs of Atuan is selected as a Newbery Honor Book by the American Library Association. *The Lathe of Heaven* wins the Locus Award for best novel. "The Word for World Is Forest," written in 1968–69, appears in Harlan Ellison's anthology *Again, Dangerous Visions* in March. In part an allegory of the Vietnam War, the novella (published as a separate volume in 1976) influences James Cameron's 2009 movie *Avatar*. Third Earthsea novel, *The Farthest Shore*, is published in September by Atheneum.

1973

The Farthest Shore wins the National Book Award for Children's Literature. Le Guin's acceptance speech, "Why Are Americans Afraid of Dragons?," is a major defense of fantasy literature. "The Word for World Is Forest" wins the Hugo Award for best novella. "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," a story inspired by philosopher William James, is published in *New Dimensions 3* in October.

1974

"The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" wins the Hugo Award for best short story. Douglas Barbour publishes an academic investigation of Le Guin's work in *Science Fiction Studies*. Completes novel *The Dispossessed*, its main character Shevek partly based on a childhood memory of physicist Robert Oppenheimer; revises ending at the urging of her friend Darko Suvin, a Croatian literary critic. Senior editor Buz Wyeth acquires the novel for Harper & Row, which publishes it in May. Wyeth remains her editor for several years.

Takes part in a virtual symposium on "Women in Science Fiction," organized by editor and fan Jeffrey D. Smith. Participants such as Suzy McKee Charnas, Virginia Kidd, Samuel R. Delany, Vonda N. McIntyre, Joanna Russ, and James Tiptree, Jr. write a round robin of letters and

responses on a variety of topics, starting in October 1974 and continuing until May 1975. Their discussions are published in the fanzine *Khatru* in November 1975. Tiptree, believed by the other participants to be a man (the writer's identity as Alice Sheldon is not revealed until 1977), expresses a number of challenging ideas about gender and power.

1975

Poetry collection *Wild Angels* is published in January. *The Dispossessed* wins the Hugo, Locus, and Nebula Awards. In August, attends the World Science Fiction Convention, or Worldcon, in Melbourne, Australia, where she is a guest of honor, and also spends a week conducting a science fiction writing workshop using the Clarion method. In May, dystopian novella "The New Atlantis" is published as part of a triptych with novellas by Gene Wolfe and James Tiptree, Jr. The first collection of Le Guin's short stories is published under the title *The Wind's Twelve Quarters*. The Le Guins spend another sabbatical year in London starting in the fall; Ursula is a visiting fellow in creative writing at the University of Reading. In November *Science Fiction Studies* devotes a special issue to her work.

1976

Nominated for a Nebula Award for best novelette for "The Diary of the Rose," but turns down the nomination as a protest of the Science Fiction Writers of America's treatment of Polish writer Stanislav Lem. The organization had given Lem an honorary membership, but then withdrawn it after Lem made statements critical of American science fiction. Conservative members of SFWA were also unhappy about honoring a writer from the Eastern bloc. During their stay in England, the Le Guins travel to Dorset to meet writer Sylvia Townsend Warner, who was an early influence on her work; Ursula says later, "I hold it one of the dearest honors of my life that I knew her for an hour." Young adult novel *Very Far Away from Anywhere Else* published in August by Atheneum. A second collection of stories, *Orsinian Tales*, published in October by Harper & Row.

1977

At the invitation of utopian scholar Robert Elliott, teaches a term at the University of California, San Diego. Among her students are aspiring writers Kim Stanley Robinson and Luis Alberto Urrea.

1978

Again rewrites early novel *Malafrena*, finishing in December. Science fiction novella "The Eye of the Heron" appears in the original anthology *Millennial Women*, edited by Virginia Kidd, in August. Mother falls ill.

1979

Wins the Gandalf Grand Master Award for life achievement in fantasy writing. Susan Wood edits the first volume of Le Guin's speeches and essays, *The Language of the Night*. Around this time she discovers the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke, a favorite and acknowledged influence. Mother dies of cancer on July 4. Le Guin's first children's picture book, *Leese Webster*, is published with illustrations by James Brunsman in September by Atheneum. *Malafrena* is published in October by G. P. Putnam's Sons. Le Guin is invited to take part in a symposium on narrative at the University of Chicago, October 26–28, along with scholars and writers such as Seymour Chatman, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Frank Kermode, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Robert Scholes, Victor Turner, Paul Ricoeur, and Hayden White. Her contribution at the end of the symposium is "It Was a Dark and Stormy Night; or, Why Are We Huddling Around the Campfire?," a piece that is both a witty summary of the discussions and a metanarrative about the value of story. She wrote in a headnote to the published version that "I had bought my first and only pair of two-inch-heeled shoes, black French ones, to wear there, but I never dared put them on; there were so many Big Guns shooting at one another that it seemed unwise to try to increase my stature." Short story "Two Delays on the Northern Line" is published in *The New Yorker* in the November 12 issue.

1980

On January 9, television movie of *The Lathe of Heaven* airs, filmed by PBS station WNET with a script by Roger Swaybill and Diane English with extensive contributions by David Loxton and Le Guin. Charles and

Ursula appear as extras, an experience she writes about in an essay called "Working on 'The Lathe.'" Le Guin likes the film and finds the whole experience quite positive, in contrast to later experiences with film adaptations of her work. Young adult novel *The Beginning Place* published in February by Harper & Row. It is reviewed in *The New Yorker* by John Updike in June. Collaborates with Virginia Kidd as editors of the anthologies *Edges* and *Interfaces*. From 1980 to 1993, teaches many times at The Flight of the Mind writing workshop for women in McKenzie Bridge, Oregon, in her opinion her most valuable teaching experience.

1981
Poetry collection *Hard Words* published by Harper.

1982
"Sur," a story that is not so much alternative history as crypto-history (the female explorers who are first to the South Pole keep their feat a secret), appears in *The New Yorker* in January. *The New Yorker* publishes two more of her stories this year, in July and October.

1984
Brian Booth founds the Oregon Institute of Literary Arts and invites Le Guin, along with Floyd Skloot and William Stafford, to become members of the advisory board.

1985
In January, *The New Yorker* publishes "She Unnames Them," a story of a type that Le Guin has called a "psychomyth." In October, publishes a major new science fiction novel, *Always Coming Home*, set in the future California. Novel involves collaboration with geologist George Hersh, artist Margaret Chodos, and composer Todd Barton, whose music of the imagined Kesh people is included on a cassette tape with the original boxed set (and creates problems with the Library of Congress, which objects to copyrighting the music of indigenous peoples). The book wins the Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize for fiction by an American woman and is a runner-up for the National Book Award. It also creates a stir among more conservative science fiction readers and writers for being what they

consider antitechnology; Le Guin points out that the book is pervaded with technology, though the technology is predicated upon a sustainable use of resources. Publishes a screenplay, *King Dog*, based on a segment of Hindu epic the Mahabharata. Composer Elinor Armer composes song settings of poems from Le Guin's collection *Wild Angels*. The two meet and begin to collaborate on eight musical compositions for orchestra and voices called *Uses of Music in Uttermost Parts*.

1987

Novella "Buffalo Gals, Won't You Come Out Tonight" appears in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. The story combines another critique of anthropocentrism with an homage to American Indian storytelling tradition.

1988

Publishes children's picture storybook *Catwings*, illustrated by S. D. Schindler. The saga of a family of flying cats continues with *Catwings Return* (1989), *Wonderful Alexander and the Catwings* (1994), and *Jane on Her Own* (1999). The origin of the whole set is a winged cat drawn as a doodle by Ursula, which prompts the writing of the first story. The Catwings are reminiscent of a much larger (and thus much less feasible) race of winged cats in *Rocannon's World*.

1989

Receives the Pilgrim Award from the Science Fiction Research Association for her critical contributions, following in the footsteps of scholars such as H. Bruce Franklin and Thomas Clareson as well as writer-critics like James Blish and Joanna Russ.

1990

A fourth Earthsea novel, *Tehanu*, is published by Atheneum/Macmillan in March. It reexamines themes from earlier volumes such as the maleness and (implicit) celibacy of wizards and the relationship between dragons and humans. Despite controversy over what some see as a revisionist history of a beloved fantasy world, the novel receives much acclaim (in 1993 in "Earthsea Revisioned" Le Guin says she always knew there was

more to tell about Earthsea, but the fourth volume had to wait until she was ready to tell a story about women's lives: "I couldn't continue my hero-tale until I had, as woman and artist, wrestled with the angels of the feminist consciousness").

1991

Tehanu wins Nebula Award and Locus Award. Publishes *Searoad*, a linked collection or story cycle about a fictional coastal town in Oregon. Wins Pushcart Prize for short story "Bill Weisler," which is collected in *Searoad*. In the fall, is writer-in-residence for a semester at Beloit College, in Wisconsin, holding the Lois and Willard Mackey Chair in Creative Writing.

1992

Searoad is shortlisted for the Pulitzer Prize in fiction. Wins the H. L. Davis Fiction Award from the Oregon Library Association.

1993

With Karen Joy Fowler and Brian Attebery, edits *The Norton Book of Science Fiction*, which, though initially criticized for being too inclusive or "politically correct," is widely used as a textbook not only in science fiction classes but also in courses in short fiction and fiction writing.

1995

Receives the World Fantasy Award for Lifetime Achievement. Publishes *Four Ways to Forgiveness*, a collection of four linked novellas set in a world within the Hainish universe. Charles retires from Portland State University.

1996

Publishes a volume of poetry, *The Twins, the Dream* (1996), in which she and Argentine poet Diana Bellessi translate each other's work. Receives a Retrospective Tiptree Award from The James Tiptree, Jr. Literary Award Council for *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

1997

Short story collection *Unlocking the Air* is nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. Stories in the collection include the 1982 *New Yorker* story "The Professor's Houses"; the title story in which the postcommunist revolution comes to Orsinia; and "The Poacher," an exploration of what it means to be an interloper rather than the hero of a fairy tale. Publishes a version of the *Tao Te Ching*, which she describes as a rendering in English, rather than a direct translation. Though she doesn't know Chinese, she is a lifelong student of Lao Tzu's enigmatic text and of Taoist philosophy, introduced to both by her father. In producing her English version she consults many translations, loose and literal, and consults with scholar J. P. Seaton.

1998

Publishes *Steering the Craft*, a guide to writing based on her own practice and on the many workshops she has conducted. Her examples of excellence include Kipling, Twain, Woolf, and a Northern Paiute storyteller whose name is not recorded.

2000

The U.S. Library of Congress honors Le Guin as a Living Legend in the Writers and Artists category. Awarded the Robert Kirsch Lifetime Achievement Award by the *Los Angeles Times*. Publishes *The Telling* in September, the first new novel since 1974 to be set in the Hainish universe of her early science fiction. Many shorter works in the same universe have appeared over the years, including "Vaster Than Empires and More Slow" (1971), "The Shobies' Story" (1990), "Another Story or A Fisherman of the Inland Sea" (1994), and the four linked novellas of *Four Ways to Forgiveness* (1995).

2001

The Telling wins the Endeavor Award for best book by a writer from the Pacific Northwest and the Locus Award. Le Guin is inducted into the Science Fiction Hall of Fame. Publishes *Tales from Earthsea* and the final volume of the Earthsea story, *The Other Wind*.

2002

Tales from Earthsea wins the Endeavor Award and the Locus Award. *The Other Wind* wins the World Fantasy Award for Best Novel. Receives the PEN/Malamud Award for Short Fiction. Fellow winner Junot Díaz acknowledges her influence. Participates in artists' rallies against the Patriot Act, passed the previous year; she writes, "What do attacks on freedom of speech and writing mean to a writer? It means that somebody's there with a big plug they're trying to fit into your mouth."

2003

Translates science fiction novel *Kalpa Imperial* by Argentine writer Angélica Gorodischer. Publishes *Changing Planes*, a linked collection of partly satirical stories about people who slip between realities while waiting in airports. Named a Grand Master by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America.

2004

Changing Planes wins the Locus Award for best story collection. Publishes *Gifts*, the first of three volumes of the *Annals of the Western Shore*, a fantasy for young adults, in September. Receives the Margaret A. Edwards Award for contributions to children's literature from the American Library Association and delivers the May Hill Arbuthnot Lecture to the ALA's subdivision, the Association for Library Service to Children.

2005

Gifts wins the 2005 PEN Center Children's Literature Award.

2006

Publishes the middle volume of the *Annals of the Western Shore*, *Voices*, in September. The Washington Center for the Book awards Le Guin the Maxine Cushing Gray Fellowship for Writers for a distinguished body of work.

2007

Publishes the final volume of the *Annals of the Western Shore*, *Powers*, in September. Works through Virgil's *Aeneid* in Latin, ten lines a day, in preparation for writing the historical novel *Lavinia*, a retelling of the

Aeneid from the point of view of the hero's Italic second wife, who is silent in the original version.

2008
Lavinia is published in April and wins the Locus Award. *Powers* wins the Nebula Award.

2009
Publishes *Cheek by Jowl*, a book of essays on fantasy and why it matters. Brother Karl dies on November 8 of cancer, age eighty-two, in Brooklyn, New York.

2010
Cheek by Jowl wins Locus Award for best nonfiction/art book. Is the subject of a festschrift, or celebratory volume, on the occasion of her eightieth birthday. *80! Memories & Reflections on Ursula K. Le Guin* is edited by Karen Joy Fowler and Debbie Notkin and includes essays and original works by many writers and scholars, including Kim Stanley Robinson, Andrea Hairston, Julie Phillips, Gwyneth Jones, Eleanor Arnason, and John Kessel. Publishes *Out Here, Poems and Images from Steens Mountain Country*, with text, poems, and sketches by Le Guin, text and photographs by Roger Dorband.

2012
Publishes *Finding My Elegy: New and Selected Poems*, her sixth book of poems. Publishes two-volume edition of selected short stories under the title *The Unreal and the Real*. Receives the J. Lloyd Eaton Lifetime Achievement Award in Science Fiction at the University of California, Riverside.

2013
Interviewed in the *Paris Review* series "The Art of Fiction." Publishes a translation of *Squaring the Circle: A Pseudotreatise of Urbogony* (2013) by Romanian writer Gheorghe Sasarman, which is retranslated from the Spanish translation by Mariano Martín Rodríguez, with both translations being overseen by Sasarman.

2014
Awarded the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. In her widely quoted speech she calls for “writers who can see alternatives to how we live now, and can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies, to other ways of being. We’ll need writers who can remember freedom—poets, visionaries—realists of a larger reality.”

2016
Publishes *Words Are My Matter: Writings about Life and Books 2000–2016*, in September.

2017
Elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. *Words Are My Matter* wins Hugo Award for Best Related Work. Publishes *No Time to Spare: Thinking about What Matters*, in December.

2018
On January 22, dies at home, to a worldwide outpouring of tributes. Final collection of poetry, *So Far So Good: Poems 2014–2018*, published in September.

Note on the Texts

This volume contains the three novels of Ursula K. Le Guin's *Annals of the Western Shore—Gifts* (2004), *Voices* (2006), and *Powers* (2007)—along with five talks and interviews related to the novels.

ANNALS OF THE WESTERN SHORE

Gifts was published in hardcover in September 2004 by Harcourt, Inc. A British printing was published the following month by Orion Children's Books, using the text of the American edition. A paperback from Harcourt Paperbacks was published in April 2006. The first American hardcover edition is the source of the text used here.

Voices was published in hardcover in September 2006 by Harcourt, Inc. A British printing was published in May 2007 by Orion Children's Books; its text is the same as the American edition except for changes to bring about conformity with British conventions of spelling and punctuation. A paperback from Harcourt Paperbacks was published in April 2008. The first American hardcover edition is the source of the text used here.

Powers was published in hardcover in September 2007 by Harcourt, Inc. A British printing was published simultaneously by Orion Children's Books; its text is the same as the American edition except for changes to bring about conformity with British conventions of spelling and punctuation. A paperback from Graphia/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt was published in April 2009. The first American hardcover edition is the source of the text used here.

TALKS AND INTERVIEWS ABOUT THE NOVELS

The sources of the texts for the five talks and interviews about the novels included in this volume are as follows:

"The Young Adult in the YA," a talk given in acceptance of the Margaret A. Edwards Award for young adult fiction from the American Library Association, was first published in *Cheek by Jowl* (Seattle: Aqueduct Press, 2009), pp. 110–23.

“Some Assumptions about Fantasy,” a talk given at the Children’s Literature Breakfast at Book Expo America in Chicago on June 4, 2004, was first published in *Cheek by Jowl*, pp. 4–7.

“Interview with Paola Castagno (2006),” an interview for Castagno’s Spanish-language fan website *Doce Moradas*. The English-language version was published on Le Guin’s own website, http://www.ursulakleguin.com/doce-moradas.

“Interview with Brian Attebery,” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, Vol. 17, no. 4 (2007), pp. 371–75.

“Interview with Alexander Chee,” *Guernica* (February 5, 2008), https://www.guernicamag.com/breaking_into_the_spell_1/.

This volume presents the texts of the original printings chosen for inclusion here, but it does not attempt to reproduce features of their typographic design. The texts are presented without change, except for the correction of typographical errors. Spelling, punctuation, and capitalization are often expressive features, and they are not altered, even when inconsistent or irregular. The following is a list of typographical errors corrected, cited by page and line number: 84.20, were coming,; 90.13, said,; 278.1, another, larger; 346.14, much I; 612.18, Publically; 618.27, even have; 618.36, principle; 621.37, Schweikert; 631.4, *of this*; 631.16, *Ocassionally*; 631.17, *details pointing to think that*; 632.1, *where would*; 632.31, *find so*; 633.4, *critizied*; 646.13, De Lilo; 646.14, MacCarthy.

Notes

In the notes below, the reference numbers denote page and line of the hardcover edition (the line count includes headings, but not rule lines). No note is made for material included in the eleventh edition of Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary. Biblical quotations and allusions are keyed to the King James Version; references to Shakespeare to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974). For further biographical background, references to other studies, and more detailed notes, see Elizabeth Cummins, *Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin*, revised edition (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993); Donna R. White, *Dancing with Dragons: Ursula K. Le Guin and the Critics* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1999); Mike Cadden, *Ursula K. Le Guin Beyond Genre: Fiction for Children and Adults* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Susan M. Bernardo and Graham J. Murphy, *Ursula K. Le Guin: A Critical Companion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2006); Richard D. Erlich, *Coyote's Song: The Teaching Stories of Ursula K. Le Guin* (Rockville, MD: Borgo, 2010); Karen Joy Fowler and Debbie Notkin, eds., *80! Memories and Reflections on Ursula K. Le Guin* (Seattle: Aqueduct Press, 2010); and Sandra J. Lindow, *Dancing the Tao: Le Guin and Moral Development* (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012).

617.4 Young Adult fiction] The publishing category of Young Adult or YA literature emerged in the late 1960s after the success of S. E. Hinton's 1967 novel *The Outsiders*. After a phase of being limited to what were termed "problem novels," the category broadened to include humor, fantasy, dystopia, and many other types of fiction. Major theorists of YA literature include Roberta Seelinger Trites, Kenneth Kidd, and Karen Coats.

617.10 Margaret Edwards Award] The Margaret A. Edwards Award was established in 1988 by the Young Adult Library Services Association to honor significant contributions to young adult literature. Le Guin won the award in 2004.

617.12–13 Herman Schein of Parnassus Press] Herman and Ruth Robbins Schein founded Parnassus Press, which primarily published children's books, in 1957 in Berkeley, California. Until Schein made the suggestion that led to *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Le Guin had not considered writing for children or young adults.

618.3 *The Sword in the Stone*] Arthurian fantasy (1938) by Terence H. White, later revised and incorporated into White's *The Once and Future King* (1958).

618.9–10 an elephant living inside a boa constrictor. The Little Prince] The narrator of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's 1943 story (published simultaneously in French as *Le Petit Prince*) shows the title character a picture that everyone else, seeing only the outline, has mistaken for a drawing of a hat. The narrator and the Prince both recognize the actual subject.

618.30 critical fallacy of authorial intent] Cleanth Brooks (1906–1994) and other New Critics believed the author's intentions to be both inaccessible and irrelevant to interpretation of a literary work.

619.4 taoistically] I.e., in accordance with Tao Te Ching or Daodejing, the philosophy expressed in the fourth century b.c.e. (or earlier). Le Guin's English version of the Tao Te Ching, published in 1997, was based on her reading of multiple translations and scholarly commentaries.

619.36 Dunsany and Tolkien] Edward John Moreton Drax Plunkett, 18th Baron of Dunsany (1878–1957), the author of *The King of Elfland's Daughter* (1924) and other fantasies, and John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (1892–1973), author of *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–55). Dunsany was a contemporary of Tolkien's whose style Le Guin praises, along with Tolkien's and Kenneth Morris's, in "From Elfland to Poughkeepsie" (1973).

620.29 Jean Karl] Jean E. Karl (1927–2000) was a writer of science fiction for children and young adults as well as an editor. Recruited by Alfred A. Knopf, Jr., to establish the Atheneum Books for Young Readers

division, she worked with distinguished writers such as E. L. Konigsburg and Robert C. O'Brien as well as Le Guin.

621.1–2 the second wave of feminism] Launched by the work of Betty Friedan (1921–2006), and the discovery by British and American readers of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), a new feminist movement went beyond the earlier campaigns for suffrage and economic opportunity (retroactively seen as First Wave Feminism) in its critique of family structures and gender roles.

621.36–37 Rusty Schweikart the astronaut] Russell Louis Schweickart (born 1935) took part in the 1969 Apollo 9 mission and, working on the ground, helped rescue a damaged Skylab in 1973.

623.2 The *Jungle Books*] *The Jungle Book* by Rudyard Kipling (1894) introduced the character of Mowgli, a boy raised in India by wolves, along with separate tales such as "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi," about a mongoose and a cobra; *The Second Jungle Book* (1895) contains more Mowgli stories, animal tales, and poems.

623.4 *Kim*] Kipling's *Kim* (1900–1901) follows its title character, an orphan of Irish parentage, from childhood on the streets of Lahore (now in Pakistan) to international intrigues across the Indian subcontinent.

623.14 the Edmund Wilsons of the world] Edmund Wilson (1895–1972) was a noted scholar of Modernist literature whose 1956 essay "Oo, Those Awful Orcs" notoriously misreads Tolkien's epic.

623.28 the true and factual story of How I Killed a Mammoth] Le Guin here retells a hypothetical anecdote about the origins of narrative that she developed more fully in her 1996 essay "The Carrier-Bag Theory of Fiction."

624.18 Charles Dodgson] Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (1832–1898), mathematician and Oxford lecturer, became better known under the pen name Lewis Carroll when he composed *Alice's Adventures Underground*, retitled *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), and its sequel *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871). In recent years,

his close relationship with the real-life model for Alice, Alice Liddell, and his photographs of sometimes-nude children have led to speculation about a tendency toward pedophilia.

625.21 the “problem of evil”] A traditional philosophical challenge: why an omnipotent God would allow evil in the world. For Le Guin, a nonbeliever, this is not a problem in theodicy (justifying God’s ways) but rather of explaining human behavior.

626.21 *The Virginian*] A foundational work of Western fiction published in 1902 by Owen Wister (1860–1938).

626.22–23 C. S. Forester, or Nordhoff and Hall, or Patrick O’Brian] A few of the best-known producers of sea adventure fiction: Cecil Louis Troughton Smith (1899–1966), writing as C. S. Forester, published a series of novels about Captain Horatio Hornblower, starting with *The Happy Return* (1937); Charles Nordhoff (1887–1947) and James Hall (1887–1951) wrote *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1932) and two sequels; Patrick O’Brian (1914–2000) wrote twenty novels and an uncompleted twenty-first about Captain Jack Aubrey and his physician friend Stephen Maturin, beginning with *Master and Commander* (1969).

628.10–11 fifth-hand Tennyson . . . Monty Python’s *Holy Grail*] Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* (1859–85) retold and repopularized Arthurian stories for a Victorian audience. Tennyson’s elevated, poetic take on the tales was satirized by Mark Twain in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889) and then burlesqued more broadly by English comic troupe Monty Python in the 1975 film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

630.8 the Bach family] Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) was the most famous of a large family of German performers and composers, including his father Johann Ambrosius Bach (1645–1695) and several cousins, brothers, sons, and grandchildren.

631.23 hemmen trees] The fictional hemmen appears as a prophetic tree in chapter 12 of *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and one of the trees

surrounding Earthsea's Immanent Grove in chapter 5 of *The Other Wind* (2001).

632.16 *Mr. Miyazaki*] Hayao Miyazaki, the creator of distinguished animated films such as *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004, adapted from Diana Wynne Jones's 1986 novel), met with Le Guin about filming *A Wizard of Earthsea* but ultimately turned the project over to his son Goro Miyazaki without consulting her. The resulting movie, *Gedo Senki*, which translates literally as *Ged's War Chronicles*, was released in English as *Tales from Earthsea* (2006). Le Guin's comment on the film was that "much of it was, I thought, incoherent. This may be because I kept trying to find and follow the story of my books while watching an entirely different story, confusingly enacted by people with the same names as in my story, but with entirely different temperaments, histories, and destinies."

632.26 Sci Fi Channel] Another film adaptation of *A Wizard of Earthsea* was shown on the Sci-Fi (or Syfy) Channel in 2004. The two-part miniseries, called *Legend of Earthsea*, was written by Gavin Scott and directed by Robert Lieberman. Le Guin was originally promised a screenplay by Philippa Boyens, cowriter of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* films. The Sci-Fi version was the object of a scathing commentary by Le Guin, "A Whitewashed Earthsea: How the Sci Fi Channel wrecked my books" (*Slate*, December 16, 2004).

633.2 *Peter Jackson and Fran Walsh*] Jackson (born 1961) is the director of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy of films; he is married to Walsh (born 1959), co-writer of the films with Jackson and Boyens (see note 632.26).

633.28 Michael Powell and I wrote a script] In a 2008 interview with Steve Lafreniere for *Vice* magazine, Le Guin expanded on this incident:

> I wrote a screenplay of the first two books of Earthsea with Michael Powell, who did *Peeping Tom* and *Black Narcissus*, in the 70s. Francis Ford Coppola was backing Michael then, and we tried hard to sell the screenplay, but the big studios were scared of Michael, either because he was old or because he had a reputation for shocking audiences. And none of them at that point had the dimmest idea of what fantasy is or how to film it. They treated us like we were lice.

634.1 *Interview with Brian Attebery*] This interview took place at Le Guin's home in Portland, Oregon. The taped conversation was transcribed and edited by *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* editorial assistants Monty Vierra and Kristi Austin.

635.18–19 What if there was a Bach who wasn't musical?] See note 630.8.

636.16 "The Poacher"] Originally published in the anthology *Xanadu* (1993), edited by Jane Yolen, and then collected by Le Guin in *Unlocking the Air and Other Stories* (1996).

637.1–2 what Lévi-Strauss calls "bricolage"] Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009) popularized the French word *bricolage* (literally "tinkering") to describe the creative repurposing of ideas and narrative elements within traditional myths.

637.32–33 My father would tell Indian stories] Alfred L. Kroeber collected and published many narratives told to him by Yurok and other American Indian friends, as Le Guin discussed in her 2001 essay "Indian Uncles."

638.25–27 Dada . . . "This is not a pipe."] Belgian artist René Magritte's 1929 painting *The Treachery of Images*, usually considered Surrealist rather than Dadaist, depicts an ordinary briar pipe with the words "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" (French: This is not a pipe) painted underneath. The contradiction between image and text has been interpreted in various ways, including the explanation that what the viewer sees is merely the picture of a pipe.

639.11 samizdat] Russian for “self-publication,” referring to the production and distribution of mimeographed materials critical of or in other ways disapproved by censors in the Soviet Union. Le Guin imported the term into a dystopian future U.S.A. as “Sammy’s-dot” in her 1975 novella “The New Atlantis.”

639.16–18 *Iraq . . . Donald Rumsfeld*] Rumsfeld (born 1932) was twice U.S. secretary of defense, serving under Presidents Gerald Ford and George W. Bush. During the latter’s term, Rumsfeld oversaw invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, resulting in the Iraq War of 2003–11.

646.13–14 DeLillo and McCarthy] The novels *White Noise* (1985) by Don DeLillo (born 1936) and *The Road* (2006) by Cormac McCarthy (born 1933) won acclaim for revisiting familiar science fictional tropes while escaping the genre label.

647.30–31 Joshua fit the battle . . . down.] “Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho,” African American spiritual first published in 1882 and recorded by Paul Robeson and Elvis Presley, among others.